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THE THIN RED LINE.

THE THIN RED LINE.

BY

ARTHUR GRIFFITHS,

AUTHOR OF "THE CHRONICLES OF NEWGATE," "FAST AND LOOSE,"
ETC., ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE THIN RED LINE.

CHAPTER I.

SECRET SERVICE.

McKAY, on returning to the Crimea, had resumed his duties at headquarters. He was complimented by Lord Raglan and General Airey on the manner in which he had performed his mission.

“Matters have improved considerably in the month or two you were absent,” said the latter to him one day. “Thanks to the animals you got us, we have been able to bring up sufficient shot and shell.”

“When is the new bombardment to take place, sir?”

“At once.”

“And the attack?”

“I cannot tell you. Some of the French generals are altogether against assaulting the fortress. They would prefer operations in the open field.”

“What do they want, sir?”

“They would like to divide the whole allied forces into three distinct armies: one to remain and guard the trenches, another to go round by sea, so as to cut the Russian communications; and the third, when this is completed, to attack the Mackenzie heights, and get in at the back of the fortress.”

“It seems rather a wild plan, sir.”

“I agree with you—wild and impossible.”

“Does the French commander-in-chief approve of it, sir?”

“General Canrobert does; but I think we have nearly seen the last of him. I expect any day to hear that he has given up the command.”

“Who will succeed him, sir?”

“Pélissier, I believe—a very different sort of man, as we shall see.”

A few days later the change which has already been referred to took place, and Marshal Pélissier came over to the English headquarters to take part in a council of war. All the principal general officers of both armies were present, and so was McKay, whose perfect acquaintance with French made him useful in interpreting and facilitating the free interchange of ideas.

The new French commander-in-chief was a prominent figure at the council—a short, stout, hard-featured man, brusque in movements and abrupt in speech; a man of much decision of character, one who made up his mind quickly, was intolerant of all oppo-

sition, and doggedly determined to force his will upon others.

When it came to the turn of the French generals to speak, one of them began a long protest against the attack as too hazardous. Several others brought forward pet schemes of their own for reducing the place.

“Enough!” said Pélissier, peremptorily. “You are not brought here to discuss whether or how we should attack. That point is already settled by my lord and myself.”

He looked at Lord Raglan, who bowed assent.

“We have decided to attack the outworks on the 7th of the month.”

“But I dissent,” began General Bosquet.

“Did you not hear me? I tell you we have decided to attack. You are only called together to arrange how it can best be carried out.”

“I have a paper here in which I have argued out the principles on which an attack should be conducted,” said another, General Niel, an engineer.

“Ah!” said Pélissier, “you gentlemen are very clever—I admit your scientific knowledge—but when I want your advice I will ask for it.”

While this conversation was in progress, the English officers present were whispering amongst themselves with undisguised satisfaction at finding that the new commander-in-chief of the French, unlike his predecessor, was well able to keep his subordinates in order;

and, all useless discussion having been cut short, the plan of attack was soon arranged.

“Well,” said Lord Raglan, “it is all clear. We shall begin by a heavy cannonade.”

“To last four-and-twenty-hours,” said Pélissier, “and then the assault.”

“At what hour?” asked Lord Raglan.

“Daylight, of course!” cried two or three French generals in a breath.

“One moment,” interposed General Airey. “Day-break is the time of all others that the enemy would expect an attack; they would therefore be best prepared for it then.”

A sharp argument followed, and lasted several minutes, each side clinging tenaciously to its own opinion.

“Do not waste your energies, gentlemen,” said Marshal Pélissier, again interfering decidedly. “Lord Raglan and I have settled that matter for ourselves. The attack will take place at five o’clock in the afternoon. That will allow time for us to get established in the enemy’s works in the night after we have carried them.”

“Of course, gentlemen,” said Lord Raglan, in breaking up the council, “you will all understand the importance of secrecy. Not a word of what has passed here must be repeated outside. It would be fatal to success if the enemy got any inkling of our intentions.”

“It’s quite extraordinary,” said General Airey to

McKay and a few more, as they passed out from the council-chamber, "how the enemy gets his information."

"Those newspaper correspondents, I suspect, are responsible," said another general. "They let out everything, and the news, directly it is printed, is telegraphed to Russia."

"That does not entirely explain it. They must be always several weeks behind. I am referring more particularly to what happens at the moment. Everything appears to be immediately known."

"Why, only the other day a Russian spy walked coolly through our second parallel," said a French officer, "and counted the number of the guns. He passed himself off as an English traveller."

"Great impudence, but great pluck. I wish we had men who would do the same. That's what I complain of. We want a better organised secret service, and men like Wellington's famous Captain Grant in the Peninsular War, bold, adroit, and quick-witted, ready to run any risks, but bound to get information in the long run. I wish I could lay my hands on a few Captain Grants."

McKay smarted under the sting of these reproaches, feeling they applied, although scarcely so intended, to him. But there was no man, after all, on the head-quarter staff better fitted to remove them. With his enterprising spirit and intimate acquaintance with many

tongues, he ought to be able to secure information that would be useful to his chiefs.

Full of this idea, he rode down that afternoon to Balaclava, the centre of all the rascaldom that had gathered around the base of the Crimean army. He was in search of agents whom he could employ as emissaries into the enemy's lines.

Putting up his horse, he mixed amongst the motley crowd that thronged the "sutlers' town," as it was called, which had sprung up half-a-mile outside Balaclava, to accommodate the swarms of strangers who, under the strict rule of Colonel Harding, had been expelled from the port itself.

The place was like a fair—a jumble of huts and shanties and ragged canvas tents, with narrow, irregular lanes between them, in which the polyglot traders bought and sold. Here were grave Armenians, scampish Greeks from the Levant, wild-eyed Bedouins, Tartars from Asia Minor, evil-visaged Italians, scowling Spaniards, hoarse-voiced, slouching Whitechapel ruffians, with a well-developed talent for dealing in stolen goods.

As McKay stood watching the curious scene, and replying rather curtly to the eager salesmen, who pestered him perpetually to buy anything and everything—food, saddlery, pocket-knives, horse-shoes, fire-arms, and swords—he became conscious of a stir and flutter among the crowd. It presently became strangely

silent, and parted obsequiously, to give passage to some great personage who approached.

This was Major Shervinton, the provost-marshal, supreme master and autocrat of all camp-followers, whom he ruled with an iron hand. Close behind him came two sturdy assistants—men who had once been drummers, and were specially selected in an army where flogging was the chief punishment for their prowess with the cat-o'-nine-tales.

Woe to the sutler, whatever his rank or nation, who fell foul of the terrible provost! Summary arrest, the briefest trial, and a sharp sentence peremptorily executed, in the shape of four dozen, was the certain treatment of all who offended against martial law.

“Hullo, McKay!” cried Shervinton, a big, burly, pleasant-faced man, whose cheery manner was in curious contrast with his formidable functions. “What brings a swell from headquarters into this den of iniquity? Lost your servant, or looking out for one? Don’t engage any one without asking me. They are an abominable lot, and deserve to be hanged, all of them.”

“You are the very fellow to help me, Shervinton,” and McKay, taking the provost-marshal aside, told him his errand.

“I firmly believe every second man here is a spy, or would be if he had the pluck.”

“Are any of them, do you think, in communication with the Russians?”

"Lots. They come and go through the lines, I believe, as they please."

"I wish I could find a few fellows of this sort."

"Perhaps I can put you in the way; only I doubt whether you can trust to a single word that they will tell you."

"But where shall we come upon them?"

"The best plan will be to consult Valetta Joe, the Maltese baker at the end of the lines. I have always suspected him of being a Russian spy; but I dare say we could buy him over if you want him. If he tries to play us false we will hang him the same day."

Valetta Joe was in his bread-store—a small shed communicating with the dark, dirty, semi-subterranean cellar behind, in which the dough was kneaded and baked. The shed was encumbered with barrels of inferior flour, and all around upon shelves lay the small short rolls, dark-looking and sour-tasting, which were sold in the camp for a shilling a piece.

"Well, Joe, what's the news from Sebastopol to-day?" asked Shervinton.

"Why you ask me, sare? I a poor Maltee baker—sell bread, make money. Have nothing to do with fight."

"You rascal! You know you're in league with the Russians. I have had my eye on you this long time. Some of these days we'll be down upon you like a cart-load of bricks."

“ You a very hard man, Major Shervinton, sare—very unkind to poor Joe. I offer you bread every day for nothing ; you say No. Why not take Joe’s bread ? ”

“ Because Joe’s a scoundrel to offer it. Do you suppose I am to be bribed in that way ? But here : I tell you what we are after. This gentleman,” pointing to McKay, “ wants news from the other side.”

“ Why you come to me ? I nothing to do with other side.”

“ You can help him, you know that, and you must ; or we will bundle you out of this and send you back to Constantinople.”

The provost-marshal’s manner was not to be mistaken.

“ What can I do, sare ? ”

“ Find out some one who can pass through the lines and bring or send him to my friend.”

“ Who is this gentleman ? ”

“ He is one of Lord Raglan’s staff ; his name is Mr. McKay.”

A close observer would have seen that the baker started slightly at the name and that he bent an eager, inquisitive look upon McKay.

“ Will the gentleman give promise to do no harm to me or my people ? ”

“ So long as you behave properly,—yes.”

“ I think I know some one, then.”

“ Produce him at once.”

“ He not here to-day ; out selling bread. Where he

find you, sare, to-morrow, or any time he have anything to tell ? ”

“ Let him come to the headquarters and ask for my tent,” said McKay. “ There is my name on a piece of paper ; if he shows that to the sentry they will let him through.”

“ Very good, sare ; you wait and see.”

“ No humbug, mind, Joe ; or I’ll be down on you ! ” added the provost-marshal. “ Is that all you want, McKay ? ”

Our hero expressed himself quite satisfied, and, with many thanks to the provost-marshal, he remounted and rode away.

CHAPTER II.

AMONG THE COSSACKS.

McKAY was in his tent next morning finishing dressing when his servant brought him a piece of crumpled paper and said there was a messenger waiting to see him. The paper was the pass given the day before to Valetta Joe; its bearer was a nondescript-looking ruffian, in a long shaggy cloak of camel's hair, whose open throat and bare legs hinted at a great scantiness of wardrobe beneath. He wore an old red fez, stained purple, on the back of his bullet-head; he had a red, freckled face, red eyebrows, red eyes, red hair, and a pointed red beard, both of which were very ragged and unkempt.

“Have you got anything to tell me?” asked McKay, sharply, in English; and when the other shook his head

he tried him in French, Spanish, and last of all in Italian.

“News,” replied the visitor, at length, laconically; “ten dollars.”

McKay put the money in his hand and was told briefly—

“To-morrow—sortie—Woronzoff Road.”

And this was all the fellow would say.

McKay passed on this information to his chief, but rather doubtfully, declining to vouch for it, or say whence it had come.

It was felt, however, that no harm could be done in accepting the news as true and preparing for a Russian attack. The event proved the wisdom of this course. The sortie was made next night. A Russian column of considerable strength advanced some distance along the Woronzoff Road, but finding the English on the alert immediately retired.

The next piece of information that reached McKay from the same source, but by a different messenger, was more readily credited. He learnt this time that the Russians intended to establish a new kind of battery in front of the Karabel suburb.

“What kind?” asked McKay.

The messenger, a hungry-looking Tartar who spoke broken English, but when encouraged explained himself freely in Russian, said—

“Big guns; they sink one end deep into the ground, the other point very high.”

“I understand. They want to give great elevation, so as to increase the range.”

“Yes, you see. They will reach right into your camp.”

Again the information proved correct. Within a couple of days the camps of the Third and Fourth Divisions, hitherto deemed safe from the fire of the fortress, were disturbed by the whistling of roundshot in their midst. The fact was reported in due course to headquarters.

“You see, sir, it is just what I was told,” said McKay to General Airey.

“Upon my word, you deserve great credit. You seem to have organised an intelligence department of your own, and, what is more to the purpose, your fellow seems always right.”

McKay was greatly gratified at this encouragement, and eager to be still more useful. He visited the Maltese baker again, and urged him to continue supplying him with news.

“Trust to Joe. Wait one little bit; you know plenty more.”

Several days passed, however, without any fresh news. Then a new messenger came, another Tartar, a very old man with a flowing grey beard, wearing a long caftan like a dressing-gown to his heels, and an enormous sheepskin cap that came far down over his eyes, and almost hid his face. He seemed very decrepit, and was excessively stupid, probably from old

age. He looked terribly frightened when brought to McKay's tent, stooping his shoulders and hanging his head in the cowering, deprecating attitude of one who expects, but would not dare to ward off, a blow.

He was tongue-tied, for he made no attempt to speak, but merely thrust forward one hand, making a deep obeisance with the other. There was a scrap of paper in the extended hand, which McKay took and opened curiously. A few lines in Italian were scrawled on it.

"The Russians are collecting large forces beyond the Tchernaya," ran the message. "Expect a new attack on that side."

"Who gave you this?" asked McKay, in Russian.

The old fellow bowed low, but made no answer.

He repeated the question in Italian and every other language of which he was master, but obtained no reply. The man remained stupidly, idiotically dumb, only grovelling lower and more abjectly each time.

"What an old jackass he is! I shall get nothing out of him, I'm afraid. But it won't do to despise the message, wherever it comes from. Take him outside," he said to his orderly, "while I go and see the general."

"You have no idea where this news comes from?" was General Airey's first inquiry.

"The same source, I don't doubt; but of course I can't vouch for its accuracy."

"It might be very important," the general was

musings. "I am not sure whether you know what we contemplate in these next few days?"

"In the direction of the Tchernaya, sir?"

"Precisely. Now that the Sardinian troops have all arrived, Lord Raglan thinks we are strong enough to extend our position as far as the river."

"I had heard nothing of it, sir?"

"If this news be true, the Russians appear to be better informed than you are, McKay."

"And are preparing to oppose our movement?"

"That's just what I should like to know, and what gives so much importance to these tidings. I only wish we could verify them. Where is your messenger? Who is he?"

"A half-witted old Tartar; you will get nothing out of him, sir. I have been trying hard this half-hour."

"But you know where the news comes from. Could you not follow it up to its source?"

"I will do so at once, sir;" and within half-an-hour McKay was in his saddle, riding down to Balaclava.

Valetta Joe was in his shop, distributing a batch of newly-baked bread to a number of itinerant vendors, each bound to retail the loaves in the various camps.

McKay waited until the place was clear, then accosted the baker sharply.

"What was the good of your sending that old numbskull to me?"

"He give you letter. You not understand?"

“Yes, yes, I understand; but I want to be certain it is true.”

“When Joe tell lies? You believe him before; if you like, believe him again.”

“But can’t you tell me more about it? How many troops have the Russians collected? Since when? What do they mean to do?”

“You ask Russian general, not me; I only know what I hear.”

“But it would be possible to tell, from the position of the enemy, something of their intentions. I could directly if I saw them.”

“Then why you not go and look for yourself?” asked Joe, carelessly; but there was a glitter in his eyes which gave a deep meaning to the simple question.

“Why not?” said McKay, whom the look had escaped. “It is well worth the risk.”

“I’ll help you, if you like,” went on Joe, with the same outwardly unconcerned manner.

“Can you? How?”

“Very easy to pass lines. You put on Tartar clothes same as that old man go to you to-day. He live near Tchorgaun; he take you right into middle of Russian camp.”

“When can he start?” asked McKay eagerly, accepting without hesitation all the risks of this perilous undertaking.

“To-night, if you choose. Come down here by-and-by ; I have everything ready.”

McKay agreed, and returned to headquarters in all haste, where he sought out his chief and confided to him his intentions.

“You are really prepared to penetrate the enemy’s lines? It will be a daring, dangerous job, McKay. I should be wrong to encourage you.”

“It is of vital importance, you say, that we should really know what the enemy is doing beyond the Tchernaya. I am quite ready to go, sir.”

“Lord Raglan—all of us—indeed, will be greatly indebted to you if you can find out. But I do not like this idea of the disguise, McKay. You ought not to go under false colours.”

“I should probably learn more.”

“Yes ; but do you know what your fate would be if you were discovered?”

“I suppose I should be hanged, sir,” said McKay, simply.

“Hanged or shot. Spies—every one out of uniform is a spy—get a very short shrift at an enemy’s hand. No ; you must stick to your legitimate dress. I am sure Lord Raglan would allow you to go under no other conditions.”

“As you wish, sir. Only I fear I should not be so useful as if I were disguised.”

“It is my order,” said the general, briefly ; and after that there was nothing more to be said.

McKay spent the rest of the afternoon at his usual duties, and towards evening, having carefully reloaded his revolver, and filled his pockets with Russian rouble notes, which he obtained on purpose from the military chest, he mounted a tough little Tartar pony, used generally by his servant, and trotted down to the hut-town.

Valetta Joe heard with marked disapprobation McKay's intention of carrying out his enterprise without assuming disguise.

"You better stay at home : not go very far like that."

"Lend me a *greggo* to throw over my coat, and a sheep-skin cap, and I shall easily pass the Cossack sentries. Where is my guide?"

"Seelim—Jee!" shouted Joe, and the old gentleman who had visited McKay that morning came ambling up from the cellar below.

"Is that old idiot to go with me? Why, he speaks no known tongue!" cried McKay.

"Only Tartar. You know no Tartar? Well, he understand the stick. Show it him—so," and Joe made a motion of striking the old man, who bent submissively to receive the blow.

"Does he know where he is to take me? What we are going to do?"

"All right. You trust him: he take you past Cossacks." Joe muttered a few unintelligible instructions to the guide, who received them with deep respect, making a low bow, first to Joe and then to McKay.

“I give him *greggo* and cap : you put them on when you like.”

McKay knew that he could only pass the British sentries openly, showing his uniform as a staff officer, so he made the guide carry the clothes, and the two pressed forward together through Kadikoi, towards the formidable line of works that now covered Balaclava.

He skirted the flank of one of the redoubts, and, passing beyond the intrenchments, came at length to our most advanced posts, a line of cavalry vedettes, stationed at a considerable distance apart.

“I am one of the headquarter staff,” he said, briefly, to the sergeant commanding the picket, “and have to make a short reconnaissance towards Kamara. You understand?”

“Are we to support you, sir?”

“No ; but look out for my coming back. It may not be till daybreak, but it will be as well, perhaps, to tell your men who I am, and to expect me. I don’t want to be shot on re-entering our own lines.”

“Never fear, sir, so long as we know. I will tell the officer, and make it all right.”

McKay now rode slowly on, his guide at his horse’s head. They kept in the valleys, already, as night was now advancing, deep in shade, and their figures, which could have been clearly made out against the sky if on the upper slopes, were nearly invisible on the lower ground.

It was a splendid summer’s evening, perfectly still and peaceful, with no sounds abroad but the ceaseless

chirp of innumerable grasshoppers, and the faint hum of buzzing insects ever on the wing. Only at intervals were strange sounds wafted on the breeze, and told their own story; the distant blare of trumpets, and the occasional "thud" of heavy cannon, gun answering gun between besiegers and besieged. As they fared along, McKay once or twice inquired, more by gesture than by voice, how far they had to go.

Each time the guide replied by a single word—"Cossack"—spoken almost in a whisper, and following by his placing finger on lip.

Half-a-mile further, the guide motioned to McKay to dismount and leave his horse, repeating the caution "Cossack!" in the same low tone of voice.

McKay, who had now put on the *greggo* and sheepskin cap, did as he was asked, and the two crept forward together, having left the horse tethered to a bush, the guide explaining by signs that they would presently come back to it.

A little farther and he placed his hand upon McKay's arms, with a motion to halt.

"H—sh!" said the old man, using a sound which has the same meaning in all tongues, and held up a finger.

McKay listened attentively, and heard voices approaching them. Instinctively he drew his revolver and waited events. The voices grew plainer and plainer, then gradually faded away.

"Cossack!" repeated the guide, and McKay gathered

that these were a couple of Cossack sentries, from whose clutches he had narrowly escaped.

Again our hero was urged forward, and this time with all speed. The guide ran, followed by McKay, for a couple of hundred yards, then halted suddenly. What next? He had thrown himself on the ground, and seemed closely examining it; in this attitude he crept forward cautiously.

The movement was presently explained. A slight splash told of water encountered. He had been in search of the river, and had found it. This was the Tchernaya—a slow sluggish stream, hidden amidst long marshy grass, and everywhere fordable, as McKay had heard, at this season of the year.

The guide now stood up and pointed to the river, motioning McKay to enter it and cross.

Our hero stepped in boldly, and in all good faith, expecting his guide to follow. But he was halfway towards the other bank, and still the old man had made no move.

Why this hesitation?

McKay beckoned to him to come on. The guide advanced a step or two, then halted irresolute.

McKay grew impatient, and repeated his motion more peremptorily. The guide advanced another step and again halted. He seemed to suffer from an invincible dislike to cold water.

“Is he a cur or a traitor?” McKay asked himself,

and drew his revolver to quicken the old man's movements, whichever he was.

The sight of the weapon seemed to throw the guide into a paroxysm of fear. He fell flat on the ground, and obstinately refused to move.

All this time McKay was in the river, up to his knees, a position not particularly comfortable. Besides, valuable time was being wasted—the night was not too long for what he had to do. Hastily regaining the bank, he rejoined the guide where he lay, and kicked him till he stood erect.

“You old scoundrel!” cried McKay, putting his revolver to his head. “Come on! do you understand? Come on, or you are a dead man!”

The gesture was threatening, not that McKay had any thought of firing. He knew a pistol-shot would raise a general alarm. Still the old man, although trembling in every limb, would not move.

“Come on!” repeated McKay, and with the idea of dragging him forward he seized him fiercely by the beard.

To his intense surprise, it came off in his hand.

“Cursed Englishman!” cried a voice with which he was perfectly familiar, and in Spanish. “You are at my mercy now. You dare not fire; your life is forfeited. The enemy is all around you. I have betrayed you into their hands.”

“Benito! Can it be possible?” But McKay did

not suffer his astonishment to interfere with his just revenge.

“On your knees, dog! Say your prayers. I will shoot you first, whatever happens to me.”

“You are too late!” cried Benito, wrenching himself from his grasp, and whistling shrilly as he ran away.

McKay fired three shots at him in succession, one of which must have told, for the scoundrel gave a great yell of pain.

The next instant McKay was surrounded by a mob of Cossacks and quickly made prisoner.

They had evidently been waiting for him, and the whole enterprise was a piece of premeditated treachery, as boldly executed as it had been craftily planned.

McKay's captors having searched his pockets with the nimbleness of London thieves, and deprived him of money, watch, and all his possessions, proceeded to handle him very roughly. He had fought and struggled desperately, but was easily overpowered. They were twenty to one, and their wild blood was aroused by his resistance. He was beaten, badly mauled, and thrown to the ground, where a number of them held him hand and foot, whilst others produced ropes to bind him fast. The brutal indignities to which he was subjected made McKay wild with rage. He addressed them in their own language, protesting vainly against such shameful ill-usage.

“Hounds! Miscreants! Sons of burnt mothers!

Do you dare to treat an English officer thus? Take me before your superior. Is there no one here in authority? I claim his protection."

"Which you don't deserve, scurvy rogue," said a quiet voice. "You are no officer—only a vile, disreputable spy."

"I can prove to you ——"

"Bah! how well you speak Russian. We know all about you; we expected you. But enough: we must be going on."

"I don't know who you may be," began McKay, hotly, "but I shall complain of you to your superior officer."

"Silence!" replied the other, haughtily. "Have I not told you to hold your tongue? Fill his mouth with clay, some of you, and bring him along."

This fresh outrage nearly maddened McKay.

"You shall carry me, then," he spluttered out, from where he still lay upon the ground.

"Ah! we'll see. Get up, will you! Prick him with the point of your lance, Ivanovich. Come, move yourself," added the officer, as McKay slowly yielded to this painful persuasion. "move yourself, or you shall feel this," and the officer cracked the long lash of his riding-whip.

"You shall answer for this barbarity," said McKay "I demand to be taken before the General at once."

"You shall see him, never fear, sooner than you might wish, perhaps."

“Take me at once before him ; I am not afraid.”

“You will wait till it suits us, dog ; meanwhile, lie there.”

They had reached a rough shelter built of mud and long reeds. It was the picket-house, the headquarters of the troop of Cossacks, and a number of them were lying and hanging about, their horses tethered close by.

The officer pointed to a corner of the hut, and, giving peremptory instructions to a couple of sentries to watch the prisoner, for whom they would have to answer with their lives, he disappeared.

Greatly dejected and cast down at the failure of his enterprise, and in acute physical pain from his recent ill-usage and the tightness of his bonds, McKay passed the rest of the night very miserably.

Dawn came at length, but with it no relief. On the contrary, daylight aggravated his sufferings. He could see now the cruel scowling visages of his captors, and the indescribable filth and squalor of the den in which he lay.

“Get up !” cried a voice ; but McKay was too much dazed and distracted by all he had endured to understand that the command was addressed to him.

It was repeated more arrogantly, and accompanied by a brutal kick.

He rose slowly and reluctantly, and asked in a sullen voice—

“Where are you taking me ?”

“Before his Excellency. Step out, or must we prick you along?”

A march of half-an-hour under a strong escort brought them to a large camp. They passed through many lines of tents, and halted presently before a smart marquee.

The Cossack officer in charge entered it, and presently returned with the order—

“March him in!”

McKay found himself in the presence of a broadly-built, middle-aged man, in the long grey great-coat worn by all ranks of the Russian army, from highest to lowest, and the flat, circular-topped cap carried also by all. There was nothing to indicate the rank of this personage but a small silver ornament on each shoulder-strap, and another in the centre of the cap. At a button-hole on his breast, however, was a small parti-coloured rosette, the simple record of orders and insignia too precious to carry in the field.

There was unbounded arrogance and contempt in his voice and manner as he addressed the prisoner, who might have been the vilest of created things.

“So”—he spoke in French, like most well-educated Russians of that day, to show their aristocratic superiority—“you have dared, wretch, to thrust yourself into the bear’s mouth! You shall be hanged in half-an-hour.”

“I claim to be treated as a prisoner of war,” said McKay, boldly.

“You ! impudent rogue ! A low camp-follower ! A sneaking, skulking spy—taken in the very act ! You !”

“I am a British officer !” went on McKay, stoutly. He was not to be browbeaten or abashed.

“Where is your uniform ?”

“Here !” replied McKay, throwing open the *greggo*, which he still wore, and showing the red waistcoat beneath, and the black breeches with their broad red stripe.

“You said he was a civilian in Tartar disguise,” said the general,—for such was the officer’s rank,—turning to one of his staff and seeming rather staggered at McKay’s announcement. He spoke in Russian.

“Take care, Excellency ; the prisoner speaks Russian.”

“Is that so ?” said the general to McKay. “An unusual accomplishment that, in English officers, I expect.”

“Yes, I am acquainted with Russian,” said McKay. Why should he deny it ? They had heard him use that language at the time of his capture.

“How and when did you learn it ?”

“I do not choose to say. What can that matter ?”

Again the staff-officer interposed and whispered something in the general’s ear.

“Of course ; I had forgotten.” Then, turning to McKay, he went on : “What is your name ?”

“McKay.”

“Your Christian names in full ?”

“Stanislas Anastasius Wilders McKay.”

“Exactly. Stanislas Alexandrovich McKay. I knew your father when he was a captain in the Polish Lancers ; was he not ? ”

“I cannot deny it.”

“He was a Russian, in the service of our holy Czar, and you, his son, are a Russian too.”

“It is false ! I am an Englishman. I have never yielded allegiance to the Czar.”

“You will find it hard to evade your responsibility. It is not to be put on or off like a coat. You were born a Russian subject, and a Russian subject you remain ! ”

“I bear a commission in the army of the British Queen. I dare you to treat me as a Russian now ! ”

“We will treat you as we find you, Mr. McKay : as an interloper disguised for an improper purpose within our lines.”

“What shall you do with me ? ” asked McKay, in a firm voice, but with a sinking heart.

“Hang you like a dog to the nearest tree. Or, stay ! out of respect for your father, whom I knew, and if you prefer it, you shall be shot.”

“I am in your power. But I warn you that, if you execute me, the merciless act will be remembered throughout Europe as an eternal disgrace to the Russian arms.”

This bold speech was not without its effect. The general consulted with his staff, and a rather animated discussion followed, at the end of which he said—

“I am not to be deterred by any such threats: still, it will be better to refer your case to my superiors. I shall send you into Sebastopol, to be dealt with as Prince Gortschakoff may think fit, only do not expect more at his hands than at mine. Rope or rifle—one of them will be your fate. See he is sent off, Colonel Golopine, will you? And now take him away.”

McKay was marched out of the marquee, still under the escort of Cossacks. But outside he was presently handed over to a fresh party; they brought up a shaggy pony—it might have been the fellow of the one he had left behind the previous night—and curtly bade him mount. When, with hands still tied, he scrambled with difficulty into his saddle, they tied his legs together by a long rope under the pony's belly, and, placing him in the centre of the escort, they started off at a jog-trot in the direction of the town.

CHAPTER III.

A PURVEYOR OF NEWS.

MR. HOBSON gave his address at Duke Street, St. James's, a lodging-house frequented by gentlemen from the neighbouring clubs. But he was never there except asleep. There was nothing strange in this, as none of the occupants of the house were much there, except at night-time—they lived at their clubs.

So, for all the landlady knew, did Mr. Hobson. But we know better. He had no club, and his daily absence from breakfast—simply a cup of coffee and a roll, which he took in the French fashion, early—till late at night was to be accounted for by his constant presence at his office or place of business, although it was both and neither. This was in a little street off Bloomsbury, the first floor over a newspaper shop.

Mr. Hobson passed here as an agent for a country

paper. It was supposed to be his business to collect and transmit news to his principals at a large seaport town on the East Coast. These were days before the present development of newspaper enterprise, when leading provincial journals have their own London offices and a private wire. Mr. Hobson's principles were very liberal according to the idea of that time; they seemed to grudge no expense with regard to the transmission of news.

Telegrams were costly things in those days, but Mr. Hobson sometimes sent off half-a-dozen in the course of a morning. He was served too, and exceedingly well, by special agents of his own, who came to him at all hours—in cabs driven recklessly, or on foot, in a stealthy, apologetic way, as though doubtful whether the news they brought would be acceptable.

The office upstairs bore out the notion of the news-agency. Its chief furniture consisted of two long, sloping tables, on which lay files of daily papers. There was one big book-case handy near the fireplace, and over the desk at which Mr. Hobson sat. On the shelves of this were ranged a couple of dozen volumes, each bearing a label on which were various letters and numerals.

On the desk itself were the usual writing appliances, a large pair of scissors, and a wide-mouthed bottle of gum.

Let us look in at Mr. Hobson on his first arrival at his office, soon after eight o'clock.

His first business was to ring his bell, which communicated with the shop below.

“My papers! It is past eight.”

“Here they are, sir, the whole lot—*Times*, *'Tizer*, *Morning Chronicle*, and *Morning Post*.”

“Why do you oblige me to ask for them? Can't you bring them as I have told you? It makes me so late with my work.” And, having delivered himself of these testy remarks, he threw himself into an arm-chair and proceeded to devour the morning's news.

“Nothing fresh from the East?” As he now talked to himself, this smooth-shaven, typical Englishman spoke, strange to say, in French. “Have Messieurs the correspondents no news? No letter in the *Post*? None in the *Morning Chronicle*? How disappointing! Ha! what's this? Two columns in the *Times*. How admirably that excellent paper is served! Let's see what it says.”

He hastily ran his eye down the columns, muttering to himself: “Ha! mostly strong language—finding fault. How kind of you to be dissatisfied with the administration, and to tell us why. The siege practically suspended, eh? Fuses won't fit the shells—so much the better, then the mortars can't fire.

“But that's no news: my friends and good masters will have found that out for themselves. Anything else? ‘Our new battery, which is only seven hundred yards from the enemy's guns, is nearly completed.’

Which battery does he mean? Has he referred to it before?"

And Mr. Hobson, as we shall still call him, got up from his seat and took a volume down from the shelf. It was labelled "T. 14, M. 55." These expressions expanded meant that it contained extracts from the *Times*, the 14th volume, for May, 1855.

After referring to an alphabetical index, he quickly turned over the leaves of the book till he found a certain page.

"Ah! here it is," he said. "'We have commenced another battery just in front of the quarries, the nearest to the enemy's works. It will be armed with the heaviest ordnance,' &c. &c. And now it is nearly ready. That must be passed on without delay."

Mr. Hobson turned to his desk and indited a telegram. It was addressed to Arrowsmith, Hull, and said—

"New shop, as already indicated, will be opened at once. Let our Gothenburg correspondent know."

"I will take it over myself. But let me first see whether there is anything to add."

He resumed his reading, and presently came to the following passage:—

"'Lord Lyons had just returned from a cruise in the Black Sea. This confirms my impression that some new movement is contemplated. Regiments have been placed under orders, and there is great stir among the fleet. A secret expedition is on the point of being

despatched somewhere, but the real destination no one as yet knows. Camp-gossip is, of course, busy; but I will not repeat the idle and misleading rumours that are on every lip.'

"Another expedition planned! I must know more of this. Where can it be going? Is it meant for the Sea of Azof and Kertch, like the last, which alarmed us so, and never got so far?

"What a business that was! We heard of it long beforehand; preparations for transport, and the embarkation of the troops. The fleet left Kamiesch, steering northward, past Sebastopol, and we thought the latter would be attacked. But lo! next morning the enemy were not in sight; the fleet had returned to Kamiesch Bay. What did it mean? It was weeks before I learnt the right story, and then it came from Paris. General Canrobert had changed his mind. The Emperor had told him not to send away any troops, but to keep all concentrated before Sebastopol. So the expedition to Kertch—for it was directed against Kertch, and the northward move was only intended to deceive us—all ended in smoke. Can they be going again to Kertch? It is hardly likely. They have some deeper designs, I feel sure. This would tally with my latest advice. Let me read once more what the Prince says."

He took a key from his pocket, opened his desk, and unlocked an inner receptacle, from which he took a letter in cypher.

“ ‘ We have learnt,’ he read, fluently, without using any key, ‘ that the enemy contemplate a great change in their plan of operations. It is reported that they propose to raise the siege, or at least reduce it to a mere blockade. The great bulk of the allied army would then be transferred to sea to another point where it would take the field against our line of communications. It is essential that we should know at the earliest date whether there is any foundation in this report. Use every endeavour to this end.’ ”

“ Yes; there can be no doubt that this surmise is corroborated by the latest news. But I must have more precise and correct information without delay. How is it to be obtained? Which of my agents can help me best? Lavitsky? He works in Woolwich Arsenal—he might know if more wheeled transport had been ordered. Or Bauer, at Portsmouth—he would know of any movements in the fleet. Or ——

“ Of course!” and he slapped his forehead, despising his own stupidity. “ Cyprienne—she can, and must, manage this.”

He proceeded to put back the papers into the secret drawer; he replaced the volume on the shelf, and, taking the telegram he had written in his hand, left the office, carefully locking the door behind him.

Hailing a cab, he was driven first to a telegraph-station, where he sent off his despatch, only adding the words :—

“ Other important transactions in the shipping in-

terest will shortly be undertaken ; more precise details will speedily follow."

Then he directed the cabman to drive to Thistle Grove, Brompton.

"Is Mrs. Wilders visible yet?" he asked the servant, on reaching her house.

"Madame does not receive so early," replied the man, a foreigner, speaking broken English, who was new to the establishment, and had never seen Mr. Hobson before.

"Take in my name!" said Mr. Hobson, peremptorily. "It is urgent, say. I must see her at once."

"I will tell madame's maid."

"Do so, and look sharp about it. Don't trouble about me—be off and tell the maid. I know my way;" and Mr. Hobson marched himself into the morning-room.

This room, in the forenoon, was on the shady side of the house—it looked on to a pretty garden, a small, level lawn of intensely green grass, jewelled with flowers. The windows, reaching to the ground, were wide open, and near one was drawn a small round table, on which was set a dainty breakfast-service of pink-and-white china, glistening plate, and crimson roses, standing out in pleasant relief upon the snowy damask.

"Beyond question, madame has a knack of making herself comfortable. I have seldom seen a cosier retreat on a broiling summer's day, and in this dusty,

dirty town. She has not breakfasted yet, nor, except for my cup of coffee, have I. I will do myself the pleasure of joining her. A cutlet and a glass of cool claret will suit me admirably just now, and we can talk as we eat."

While he stood there, admiring cynically, Mrs. Wilders came in.

She was in a loose morning wrapper of pale pink, and had seemingly taken little trouble with her day's toilette as yet. Her *negligé* dress hinted at hurry in leaving her room, and she addressed her visitor in a hasty, impatient way.

"What is this so urgent that you come intruding at such an unseemly hour?"

"You grow indolent, my dear madame. Why, it is half-past eleven."

"I have not yet breakfasted."

"So I see. I am delighted. No more have I."

"Was it to ask yourself to breakfast that you came here this morning?"

"Not entirely; another little matter brought me; but we can deal with the two at the same time. Pray order them to serve: I am excessively hungry."

Mrs. Wilders, without answering, pettishly pulled the bell.

"Lay another cover," she told the man, "and bring wine with the breakfast. You will want it, I suppose," she said to her guest; "I never touch it in the morning."

“How charmingly you manage! You have a special gift as a housewife. What a delightful meal! I have seen nothing more refined in Paris.”

There was a delicious lobster-salad, a dish of cold cutlets and jelly, and a great heap of strawberries with cream.

“Now get to business,” said Mrs. Wilders, in a snarling, ill-tempered way; “let’s have it out.”

“It’s a pity you are out of humour this morning,” observed Mr. Hobson, with a provoking forbearance. “I have come to find fault.”

Mrs. Wilders shrugged her shoulders, implying that she did not care.

“It may seem ungracious, but I must take you to task seriously. How is it you give me no news?”

“I tell you all I hear; what more do you want?”

“A great deal. Look here, Cyprienne, I am not to be put off with stale, second-hand gossip—the echoes of the Clubs; vague, empty rumours that are on everybody’s tongue long before they come to me. I must have fresh, brand-new intelligence, straight from the fountain-head. You must get it for me, or——”

The old frightened look which we have seen on Mrs. Wilders’s face before when brought into antagonism with this man returned to it, and her voice was less firm, her manner less defiant, as she said—

“Spare me your threats. You know I am most anxious to oblige you—to help you.”

“You have put me off too long with these-vague

promises. I must have something more tangible at once."

"It is so difficult to find out anything."

"Not if you go the right way to work. A woman of your attractions, your cleverness, ought to be able to twist any man round her finger. You have done it often enough already, goodness knows. Now, there's old Faulks; when did you see him last?"

"Not a week ago."

"And you got nothing out of him? I thought he was devoted to you."

"He is most attentive, most obliging, but still exceedingly wary. He will talk about anything rather than business. I have tried him repeatedly. I have introduced the subject of his nephew, of whom he is now so proud."

"Your enemy, you mean—that young McKay."

"Exactly. I thought that by bringing the conversation to the Crimea I might squeeze out something important. But no! he is always as close as an oyster."

"He will be ready enough to talk about his dear nephew before long. You may look out for some startling news about McKay."

"Really?" said Mrs. Wilders, growing suddenly excited. "Your plan has succeeded, then?"

"Any day you may hear that he has been removed effectually, and for ever, from your path. But for the moment that will keep. What presses is that you should squeeze old Faulks. There is something that I

must know to-day, or to-morrow at latest. You must go and see him at once."

"At his office?"

"Why not?"

"But on what pretence? I have never been there as yet. He has always come here to lunch or dine. He is fond of a good dinner."

"Ask him again."

"But I could do that by letter. He may suspect me if I go to him without some plausible excuse."

"Trump up some story about his nephew. Only get to him; he will soon give you an opening you can turn to account. I trust to your cleverness for that; only lose no time."

"Must I go to-day?"

"This very afternoon; directly you leave the house."

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHITEHALL.

THE Military Munitions' department was one of a dozen or more seated at that period in and about Whitehall. Its ostensible functions, as its title implied, were to supply warlike and other stores to the British army when actively engaged. But as wars had been rare for nearly half-a-century it had done more during that time towards providing a number of worthy gentlemen with comfortable incomes than in ministering to the wants of troops in the field.

It was an office of good traditions: highly respectable, very old-fashioned, slow moving, not to say dilatory, but tenacious of its dignity as regards other departments, and obstinately wedded to its own way of conducting the business of the country.

The most prominent personage in the department for

some little time before the outbreak of hostilities with Russia, and during the war, was Mr. Rufus Faulks, brother to the Captain Faulks we met on board the *Burlington Castle*, and also uncle to Stanislas McKay.

Mr. Faulks had entered the office as a lad, and, after long years of patient service, had worked his way up through all the grades to the very top of the permanent staff. He had no one over him now but the statesman who, for the time being, was responsible for the department in Parliament—a mere politician, perfectly raw in official routine, who had the good taste and better sense to surrender himself blindly to the guidance of Mr. Faulks. What could a bird of passage know of the deep mysteries of procedure it took a lifetime to learn?

He was the true type and pattern of a Government official. A prim, plethoric, middle-aged little man; always dressed very carefully; walking on the tips of his toes; speaking precisely, with a priggish, self-satisfied smirk, and giving his opinion, even on the weather, with the air of a man who was secretly better informed than the rest of the world.

He was very punctual in his attendance at the office, passing the threshold of the private house in a side-street near Whitehall, where the department was lodged all by itself, every morning at eleven, and doing the same thing every day at the same time with the most praiseworthy, methodical precision. His first step was to deposit his umbrella in one corner, his second to hang his

hat in another, his third to take an old office-coat out of a bottom drawer in his desk, substituting it for the shiny black frock-coat he invariably wore; then he looked through his letters, selected all of a private and confidential nature, and placing the morning's *Times* across his knees deposited himself in an arm-chair near the fire. He was supposed to be digesting the morning's correspondence, and no one during this the first half-hour of his attendance would have ventured to intrude upon him unsummoned.

It was with a very black face, therefore, that when thus occupied upon the morning that Mr. Hobson visited Mrs. Wilders he saw his own private messenger enter the room.

"What is it, Lightowlar? I have forbidden you to disturb me till twelve."

"Beg pardon, sir; very sorry, sir!" replied the messenger, who had been confidential valet to a Cabinet Minister, and prided himself on the extreme polish of his language and demeanour. "I am aware that you have intimidated your disapprobation of unseasonable interruption, but——"

"Well, well! out with it, or take yourself off."

"Sir 'Umphry, sir; he have just come to the office quite unforseen."

Sir Humphrey Fothergill was the Parliamentary head of the office at this time.

"Sir Humphrey here! What an extraordinary thing!"

The proper time for the appearance of this great functionary was at 4 p.m., on his way to the House, and Mr. Faulks felt quite annoyed at the departure from the ordinary rule.

“Sir 'Umphry 'ave took us all aback, sir. His own messenger, Mr. Sprott, was not in the way for the moment, and Sir 'Umphry expressed himself in rather strong terms.”

“Serve Sprott right. But what has all that to do with me?”

“Sir 'Umphry, sir, 'ave sent, sir”—the man could hardly bring himself to convey the message; “he 'ave sent, sir, to say he wishes to see you at once.”

“Me? At this hour? Impossible!”

This pestilent Sir Humphrey was upsetting every tradition of the office.

Mr. Faulks again settled himself in his arm-chair, with the air of a man who refused to move—out of his proper groove.

“Mr. Faulks! Mr. Faulks!” Another unseemly intrusion. This time it was Sprott, the chief messenger, flurried and frightened, no doubt, by recent reproof. “Sir Humphrey's going on awful, sir; he's rung his bell three times, and asked how long it took you to go upstairs.”

Sullenly, and sorely against his will, Mr. Faulks rose and joined his chief.

“I have asked for you several times,” said Sir Humphrey Fothergill, a much younger man than Mr. Faulks,

new to official life, but a promising party politician, with a great belief in himself and his importance as a member of the House of Commons; "you must have come late."

"Pardon me, I was here at my usual time; but in the thirty-five years that I have had the honour to serve in the Military Munition Department I never remember a Parliamentary chief who came so early as you."

"I shall come when I choose—in the middle of the night, if it suits me or is necessary, as is more than probable in these busy times."

Mr. Faulks waved his hands and bowed stiffly, as much as to say that Sir Humphrey was master of his actions, but that he need not expect to see him.

"You all want stirring up here," said Sir Humphrey abruptly. "It is high time to give you a fillip."

"I am not aware——" Mr. Faulks began, in indignant protest, but his chief cut him short.

"Did you read what happened in the House last night?"

"I have only just glanced at the *Times*," replied Mr. Faulks, in a melancholy voice, thinking how rudely his regular perusal of the great journal had been interrupted that morning.

"It's not pleasant reading. There was a set attack upon this department, and they handled us very roughly, let me tell you. It made my ears tingle."

“We have been abused cruelly—unfairly abused for the last twelve months,” said Mr. Faulks with a most injured air.

“You richly deserved it. Amongst you the troops in the Crimea have been dying from starvation, perishing from cold.”

“I can assure you that is distinctly unjust. I can assure you great quantities of warm clothing were dispatched in due course.”

“Ay, but when?”

“I can’t give you the exact dates, but we have been advised of their arrival these last few weeks.”

“Warm clothing in May? A very seasonable provision! But it’s all of a piece. How about those fuzes?”

“To what do you refer, may I ask?” said Mr. Faulks very blandly; but his blood was boiling at the indignity of being lectured thus by a young man altogether new to the office.

“It is all in this morning’s *Times*. The siege is at a standstill; the fuzes won’t fit the shells. There are plenty of 10-inch fuzes, but only 13-inch shells. Who is to blame for that?”

“Our ordnance branch, I fear. But it shall be seen to: I will address a communication to the head, calling his attention to the error.”

“And when will he get the letter?”

“In the course of the next two or three days.”

“And his reply will take about the same time to reach you, I suppose?”

“Probably: more or less.”

“Where is the office of the ordnance branch? In this house?”

“Oh, no!” replied Mr. Faulks, in a voice full of profound pity for the lamentable ignorance of his chief. “It is at No. 14.”

“Just round the corner—in fact, half-a-dozen yards off?”

“Yes, about that.”

“Well, look here, Mr. Faulks: you just put on your hat and go round the corner and see the head of the ordnance branch, and settle all this with him in the next five minutes, d’ye hear?”

“What, I? personally? That would be altogether against precedent and contrary to the rules of the office. I really must decline to introduce such a radical change.”

“You will obey my order, this very instant! It is utterly preposterous to waste six days sending letters backwards and forwards about a paltry matter that can be settled by word of mouth in as many minutes. No wonder the troops have died like rotten sheep!”

“I have been five-and-thirty years in this office ——” began Mr. Faulks.

“Oh! don’t bother me with your historical reminiscences,” said Sir Humphrey, cutting him short.

“And never, during all that period ——” went on Mr. Faulks, manfully.

“—— Have you done anything to-day that could be put off till to-morrow? But now go and see about this at once—do you understand?—and then come back to me; I have other matters to arrange. We have news that a fresh expedition will shortly start for Kertch, and we are requested to send out with all dispatch considerable supplies of salt rations.”

“It will be necessary to refer to the Admiralty: they will require proper notice.”

“You will get the rations within twenty-four hours, notice or no notice. But we will discuss that by-and-by. Meanwhile, hurry off to the ordnance branch.”

Mr. Faulks went to the door, protesting and muttering to himself.

“Stay! one word more! It is wrong of me, perhaps, to hint that your zeal requires any stimulus, Mr. Faulks.”

“Hardly, I hope. I have endeavoured for the last five-and-thirty years ——”

“Yes, yes, we know all about that. But I have been told that you looked for some special recognition of your services—a decoration, the Order of the Bath—from the last Administration. Now, unless you bestir yourself, don’t expect anything of the kind from us.”

“I do not pretend to say that I have earned the favour of my Sovereign; but in any case it would depend upon her most gracious Majesty whether ——”

“Don’t make any mistake about it. You can only get the Bath through the recommendation of your immediate superiors. There’s stimulus, if you want it. But don’t let me detain you any more.”

Mr. Faulks went slowly downstairs, and still more slowly resumed his out-of-door frock-coat; he took up his hat and stick in the same deliberate fashion, and started at a snail’s pace for round the corner.

He drawled and dawdled through the business, which five minutes’ sharp talk could have ended, and it was nearly lunch-time before he returned to his chief.

“Well, you might have been to the Crimea and back!” said Sir Humphrey, impatiently.

“Matters of such moment are not to be disposed of out of hand. Haste is certain to produce dangerous confusion, and it has been my unvaried experience during five-and-thirty years ——”

“Which it has taken you to find the shortest way next door. But there! let us get on with our work. Now, about this expedition to Kertch?”

And Sir Humphrey proceeded to discuss and dispose of great questions of supply in a prompt, off-hand way that both silenced and terrified Mr. Faulks.

CHAPTER V.

MR. FAULKS TALKS.

MR. FAULKS was rather fond of good living, and, as a rule, he never allowed official cares to interfere with his lunch, a meal brought in on a tray from an eating-house in the Strand. To make a proper selection from the bill of fare sent in every morning was a weighty matter, taking precedence over any other work, however pressing.

But to-day he scarcely enjoyed the haricot of lamb with new potatoes and young peas that he found waiting, and slightly cold, when he went downstairs to his own room.

“For two pins I’d take my retirement; I can claim it; where would they be then?”

This estimable personage shared with thousands the

strange superstition that the world cannot do without them.

“This cook is falling off most terribly. The lamb is uneatable, the potatoes are waxy, and the peas like pills. Ugh! I never made a worse lunch!”

A large cigar and the perusal of the long-neglected *Times* did not pacify him much, and he was still fretting and fuming when his messenger brought in a three-cornered note and asked if there was any reply.

“The lady, sir—a real lady, I should think—’ave brought it in her own bruffam, and was most particular, sir, as you should ’ave it at once.”

Mr. Faulks took the letter and examined it carefully.

“From that charming woman, Mrs. Wilders, my cousin, or rather Stanny’s cousin; but his relations are mine. I am his uncle; some day, if he lives, I shall be uncle to an earl. They will treat me better perhaps when I have all the Essendine interest at my back. Whippersnappers like this Fothergill will scarcely dare to snub me then. A good lad Stanislas; I always liked him. I wish he was back amongst us, and not at that horrid war.”

“The lady, sir, is most anxious, sir, to have a answer,” put in the messenger, recalling Mr. Faulks’s attention to the letter.

“Ah! to be sure. One moment,” and he read the note:—

“Cannot I see you?” it said. “I am oppressed with fears for our dear Stanislas. Do please spare me a few minutes of your valuable time.

“CYPRIENNE W.”

“I will go down to her at once, say.” And, seizing his hat, Mr. Faulks followed the messenger into the street, where he found Mrs. Wilders in her tiny brougham, at the door of the office.

“Oh, how good of you!” she said, putting out a little hand in a perfectly-fitting grey glove. “I would not disturb you for worlds, but I was so anxious.”

“What has happened? Nothing serious, I trust?”

“I do not know. I cannot say. I am terribly upset.”

“Do tell me all about it.”

“Of course; that is why I came. But it will take some time. Will you get into the carriage? Are you going anywhere? I can take you, and tell you upon the road.”

“I am afraid I cannot leave just at present.” He had misgivings as to his arbitrary young chief. “But if I might suggest, and if you will honour me so far, will you not come upstairs to my room?”

“Oh! willingly, if you will allow me.”

This was all that she wished. Very soon, escorted by her obsequious friend, she found herself in his arm-chair, pouring forth a long and intricate, not to say incomprehensible, story about Stanislas McKay. She had heard, she said—it was not necessary to say how—

that they meant to send him on some secret expedition, full of danger, she understood, and she thought it such a pity—so wrong, so unfair !

“He ought really to return to England and take up his proper position,” she went on. “Lord Essendine wishes it, and so, I am sure, must you.”

“No one will be more pleased to welcome him back than myself,” said Mr. Faulks. “I should be glad indeed of his countenance and support just now. They do not treat me too well here.”

“Can it be possible !” she exclaimed, in a voice of tenderest interest. “You whom I have always thought one of the most useful, estimable men in the public service.”

“Things are not what they were, my dear lady ; they do not appreciate me here. They deny me the smallest, the most trifling recognition. Would you believe it that, after five-and-thirty years of uninterrupted service, they still hesitate to give me a decoration ? I ought to have had the Companionship of the Bath at the last change of Ministry.”

“Of course you ought ; I have often heard Lord Essendine say so.”

“Has he now, really ?” asked Mr. Faulks, much flattered.

“Frequently,” went on Mrs. Wilders, fluently, availing herself readily of the opening he had given her. “I am sure he has only to know that you are disappointed in this matter and he will give you the

warmest support. You know he belongs to the party now in power, and a word from him ——”

“If he will deign to interest himself on my behalf the matter is, of course, settled.”

“And he shall, rely on me for that.”

“How can I ever thank you sufficiently, dear lady, for your most gracious, most generous encouragement? If I can serve you in any way, command me.”

“Well, you can oblige me in a little matter I have much at heart.”

“Only name it,” he cried, earnestly.

“Come and dine with me to-night in Thistle Grove.”

“Is that all? I accept with enthusiasm.”

“Only a small party: four at the most. You know I am still in deepest mourning. My poor dear general ——” she dropped her voice and her eyes.

“Ah!” said Mr. Faulks, sympathetically; “you have known great sorrows. But you must not brood, dear lady; we should struggle with grief.” He took her hand, and looked at her in a kindly, pitying way.

The moment was ill-timed for interruption, but the blame was Sir Humphrey’s, who now sent the messenger with a fresh and more imperious summons for the attendance of Mr. Faulks.

He got up hurriedly, nervously, saying—

“I must leave you, dear lady; there are matters of great urgency to be dealt with to-day.”

“No apologies: it’s my fault for trespassing here. I

will run away. To-night—do not forget me, at eight,” and Mrs. Wilders took her departure.

The little house in Thistle Grove wore its most smiling aspect at evening, with its soft-shaded lamps, pretty hangings, and quantities of variegated, sweet-smelling flowers; it was radiant with light, full of perfume, bright in colour.

Mrs. Wilders's guests were three—Mrs. Jones, a staid, hard-featured, middle-aged lady in deep black, an officer's widow like herself, as she explained, who lived a few doors down, and was an acquaintance of the last month or two, Mr. Hobson, and Mr. Faulks.

The dinner was almost studied in simplicity, but absolutely perfect of its kind. Clear soup, salmon cutlets, a little joint, salad, and quail in vine-leaves. The only wine was a sound medium claret, except at dessert, when, after the French fashion, Mrs. Wilders gave champagne.

Through dinner the talk had been light and trivial, but with dessert and coffee it gradually grew more serious, and touched upon the topics of the day.

“These must be trying times for you Government officials,” said Mr. Hobson, carelessly.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Mr. Faulks, with a deep sigh. “I often feel that life is hardly worth having.”

“The public service is no bed of roses,” remarked Mrs. Jones. “It killed my poor dear husband.”

“It is so disheartening to slave day after day as you

do," went on Mrs. Wilders to Mr. Faulks, "and get no thanks."

"Very much the other thing!" cried Mr. Hobson; "you are about the best abused people in the world, I should say, just now."

"It is hard on us, for I assure you we do our best. We are constantly, uninterruptedly at work. I never know a moment that I may not be wanted—that some special messenger may not be after me. I have to leave my address so that they can find me wherever I am, and at any time."

"Is it so now?" asked Mrs. Wilders. "Cannot you even give me the pleasure of your society for an hour or two without its being known?"

"I do it in this way, dear lady. I leave a sealed envelope on my hall table, which is only opened in case of urgency."

"You don't expect to be summoned to-night, I hope?" inquired the fair hostess.

"I cannot say; it is quite probable."

"There are, perhaps, important movements intended in the Crimea?" asked Mr. Hobson, as he picked his strawberries and prepared himself a sauce of sugar and cream.

"You have heard so?" replied Mr. Faulks.

"There was something in the *Times* this morning from their special correspondent. Some new expedition was talked of."

"They ought to be all shot, these correspondents,"

said Mr. Faulks, decisively. "They permit themselves to canvass the conduct and character of persons of our position with a freedom that is intolerable."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Hobson, "but as one of the British public, a taxpayer and bearer of the public burden, I feel grateful to these newspaper gentlemen for seeing that our money is properly spent."

"I am sorry to hear you commend them," said Mr. Faulks, in a way that implied much resentment.

"Well, but without them we should hear of nothing that is going on. This new expedition, for instance, which I have a shrewd suspicion covers some deep design."

"You think so, do you? On what ground, pray?" said Mr. Faulks, with the slight sneer of superior knowledge.

"The *Times* man hints as much. There has long been a rumour of some change in the plan of operations, and he seems to be right in his conjecture."

"He knows nothing at all about it—how can he?" said Mr. Faulks, contemptuously.

"You must forgive my differing with you. It is not my business to say how he obtains his information, but I have generally found that he is right. Now, this great expedition ——"

"Is all moonshine!" cried Mr. Faulks, losing his temper, and thrown off his guard. "It's quite a small affair—a trip round the Sea of Azof, and the reduction of Kertch."

“The old affair revived, in fact.”

“Neither more nor less. There is no intention at the present moment of drawing any large detachment from the siege. On the contrary, every effort is being strained to bring it to an end.”

“Quite right too; it ought to be vigorously prosecuted—attack should follow attack.”

“We shall hear of one or more before long,” went on Mr. Faulks, growing more and more garrulous. “Our advanced trenches are creeping very near, and I expect any day to hear that the French have stormed the Mamelon, and our people the Quarries.”

“Indeed? That is very interesting. And we shall take them—do you think?”

“We must. The attacking columns will be of great strength, and the attack will be preceded by a tremendous cannonade.”

“So we may expect great news in the next few days?” said Mrs. Wilders, eagerly.

“More bloodshed!” added Mrs. Jones, with a deep sigh. “This terrible war!”

“You can’t make omelettes without breaking eggs,” said Mr. Hobson, sententiously. “The more terrible a war is, the sooner it is ended.”

“We are getting very ghastly in our talk,” said Mrs. Wilders. “Suppose we go into the drawing-room and have some tea.”

As they passed out of the dining-room, Mr. Hobson managed to whisper a few words.

“I have squeezed him dry: that was all I wanted to know. I need not stay any longer, I think.”

“Who knows? His special messenger may come down with the very latest. If so, you ought to be able to extract that from him too.”

Mrs. Wilders spoke these words carelessly; but, as often happens, they correctly foretold what presently occurred.

When they were all seated cosily around the tea-table, Mrs. Wilders's man brought in a great dispatch upon a salver.

“For Mr. Faulks,” he said, and with an air of the greatest importance the hard-worked, indispensable official tore open the cover.

It contained a few hurried lines from Sir Humphrey Fothergill to the following effect:—

“A telegram has just been received from Lord Raglan. It contains painful news for you; but I thought it best to let you have it at once.”

He opened the telegram with trembling hands and read—

“Yesterday, Mr. McKay, of the quartermaster-general's staff, ventured through the enemy's lines in the direction of the Tchernaya to make a special reconnaissance. He unfortunately was captured. I sent a flag of truce into Sebastopol, asking that he might be exchanged, but have been peremptorily refused. Gortschakoff asserts that he is a Russian subject and was taken red-handed as a spy. He is to

be executed immediately. Will renew request with strong protest, but fear there is no hope."

Mr. Faulks groaned heavily and let the telegram fall on the ground.

"What has happened?" asked Mrs. Wilders, eagerly.

"You were right—too right. That poor boy ——"

"Stanislas?"

"Yes ; my poor nephew has fallen into the hands of these bloodthirsty Russians, who are resolved to execute him as a traitor and a spy."

CHAPTER VI.

MARIQUITA'S QUEST.

HYDE's unfortunate affair with the sailor had ended in a broken rib and a dislocated arm. He was taken back senseless to the camp of the Royal Picts, and for some days required the closest care. It was nearly a week before he so far recovered himself as to be able to give any account of what had occurred, and longer before he remembered accurately what was taking him to headquarters at the time of the accident.

It flashed across him quite suddenly, and with something of a shock, that while he lay there helpless his friend McKay was still in danger.

"When shall I be able to get about again?" he asked the doctor, anxiously.

"You won't be fit for duty, if that's what you're driving at, for many a long day to come."

“I can go about with my arm in a sling. I am beginning to feel perfectly well otherwise.”

“What’s the good of a soldier with his arm in a sling? No: as soon as you are fit to move I shall have you sent down to Scutari.”

“But I don’t want to go: I had much rather stay here with the old corps.”

He was thinking of the business he had still in hand.

“You will have to obey orders, anyhow, so make up your mind to go.”

The regimental surgeon of the Royal Picts was a morose old Scotchman, very obstinate and intolerant of opposition. What he said he stuck to, and Hyde knew that he must prepare to leave the Crimea in a short time, probably before he was strong enough to go in person to headquarters and find out McKay.

It would be necessary, therefore, to find some other messenger, and, after considering what was best to be done, he resolved to beg Colonel Blythe to come and see him, intending to make him his confidant.

“Well, Rupert,” said the Colonel—they were alone together—“this is a bad business. Macinlay tells me you won’t be fit for duty for months. He is going to send you at once before a medical board.”

“It is very aggravating, Colonel, as I particularly wished to be here for the next few weeks.

“To be in at the death, I suppose? We are bound to take the place at the next attack.”

"I hope you may. But it is not that. Our friend McKay is in imminent danger."

"What is the nature of the danger?"

"He is pursued by the relentless hate of an infamous woman: one who has never yet spared any who dared to thwart or oppose her."

"What on earth do you mean, Hyde?" The colonel thought the old sergeant was wandering in his mind. "There are no women out here except Mother Charcoal, and a few French *vivandières*. How can any of them threaten McKay?"

"It is as I say, colonel. By-and-by I will tell you everything. But let me implore you to find out McKay at once and bring him to me. I cannot, you see, go to him."

"Is this very urgent?"

"A matter of life and death, I assure you."

"I will order a horse at once. It is all very mysterious and extraordinary; but then you have been a mystery, Rupert Hyde, a riddle and a puzzle, ever since I have known you."

"It will all be unravelled some day, colonel, never fear; but lose no time, let me beg;" and, thus adjured, the colonel presently mounted his horse and galloped over to headquarters.

He arrived there the day after McKay's excursion into the Russian lines. The young staff-officer was still absent, and fears were already entertained as to his

safety, although it was not positively known as yet that he had come to harm.

Let us leave Colonel Blythe and other friends exchanging anxious conjectures as to McKay's fate and return to Mariquita, whose misgivings had steadily increased from the day she had last seen Hyde.

He had promised she should see him again, and, perhaps, Stanislas, without delay. Yet this was more than a week since. What had become of the old soldier? Had he fulfilled his mission of warning, or had he been involved in the dire intrigues that threatened her lover?

Her lover, too; her Stanislas—to save whom she had come so far, braving so many dangers, and at the peril of her maidenly self-respect—had anything happened to him?

The terrible uncertainty was crushing her. She must know something, even the worst, or her apprehensions, ever present and hourly increasing, would kill her.

To whom could she turn in this time of cruel suspense? Hyde had deserted her, seemingly; in spite of her heartfelt anxiety she could not bring herself to approach McKay.

One other man there was; that villain, Benito Villegas—the source, in truth, of all her trouble—might give her news. Bad news, possibly, but still news, if only she could lay hands on him. Where

and how was he hiding? Every effort to find him had been fruitless hitherto.

At Valetta Joe's they knew no such name, so they told her when she inquired cautiously for Benito from some of the loafers hanging about the shop.

Yet that was the place to which he was to proceed on arrival. The letter she had picked up in Bombardier Lane said so. He must be hiding, or in disguise; and now, when her anxiety for her beloved Stanislas was at its highest pitch, she was more than ever resolved to find out somehow what Benito was doing.

One afternoon, when business was rather slack at Mother Charcoal's, she seized a chance of visiting the hut-town.

"Any work?" she asked, in Spanish, of Valetta Joe himself, whom she met at the door of his shanty.

"What can you do? Where do you come from? Spain?" replied the baker in the same tongue.

"Yes, from Malaga. I can do anything—try me."

"Can you sell bread through the camp? I am a man short, and could take you on, perhaps, until he is better. Come down below, and I will give you a basketful to hawk about."

"I shall have to tell them at the canteen—Mother Charcoal's—that I am going to leave."

"That won't do. You must come at once if you come at all. Which will you do?"

While she still hesitated, a voice from the subter-

ranean regions at the end of the shop fell upon her ear. Her heart gave a great jump at the sound—it was Benito's. "Joe! Joe!" he was crying, in feeble accents.

"It's take it or leave it. There are plenty of your sort about. Well, what do you say?"

"I accept," said Mariquita, eagerly. "When shall I begin work?"

"Now, this minute. Come down and help me to get a batch of bread out of the oven."

They passed down into the cellar by a short ladder, and Mariquita found herself in a dimly-lighted cavernous den, hot and stifling, at one end of which glowed the grate below the oven.

"Joe! Joe!" repeated Benito's voice, and Mariquita, with difficulty, made out his figure lying on a heap of rags in a corner of the cellar.

"Well?" answered Joe, roughly, as soon as he had pointed out the bread-trays and desired her to get them in order. "What's wrong with you now? You are always groaning and calling out."

"Water!" asked Benito, piteously. "This place is like a furnace. I am suffering torments from raging thirst and this cruel wound. Accursed Englishman! may I live to repay him!"

"You will have to hurry and get well, or the Russians will save you the trouble," remarked Joe.

"That is my only consolation. It was I who gave him to them."

Although bending busily over her task, Mariquita felt her heart beat faster and faster. These words, which she now overheard through such a strange chance, clearly referred to her lover.

“Will they hang him, do you think?” asked Benito.

“As sure as the sun breeds flies. We have done our business too well to give him a chance of escape.”

“Would that I might hold the rope, that I might see his agony, his last convulsions! That I might myself revenge the tortures he has made me bear!”

And Benito sank back upon his miserable bed, groaning with pain.

“Don’t whine like that, you miserable cur!” said Joe, brutally. “It’s bad enough to have you here at all, without your disturbing the whole place. Why did you come here?”

“Where else could I go? I never expected to get so far. I was faint from loss of blood, and in frightful pain. I thought I should die as I crawled along.”

“Better you had than bring me into trouble, as you will if the provost-marshal finds you here.”

“It is cowardly of you to ill-treat and upbraid me. Take care! I am helpless now, but by-and-by, when I am well and strong, you shall suffer for your cruelty.”

“What! you threaten me? But there, it is idle to waste words on such a wretched rogue; I have other work to do. Now, young imp!” cried Joe, turning to Mariquita, “stir yourself, and let us get out this batch of bread.”

The conversation which she had overheard, conveying as it did the confirmation of her worst fears, had agitated Mariquita exceedingly, but she knew that she must control her emotion, and arouse no suspicions in the minds of these villains. Benito, wounded, and in desperate case, was in no position to recognise her, and Joe was, of course, completely in the dark as to whom he had admitted within his shop.

The work in the cellar was not completed and the bread carried upstairs for an hour or more, during which time Mariquita was able to think over and decide what she would do. She had matured her plan when they got upstairs.

“Pay me!” she said, saucily, to Valetta Joe. “I shan’t stop here.”

“Pay you, vile imp? Why, I only took you on trial!”

“Pay me!” she repeated. “You shan’t cheat me.”

“I owe you nothing. Be off out of this or you shall feel the weight of my hand.”

“Pay me, you swindling old rogue!” shouted Mariquita, in a shrill voice. “I won’t go till I get my rights.”

“You won’t!” cried Joe, as he seized her roughly by the collar and dragged her towards the door.

“Villain! Thief! Murder! Help, help! He is killing me!” cried Mariquita, now at the top of her voice, and this frenzied appeal had the exact effect she hoped. A crowd of camp-followers quickly gathered

around the door of the shanty, and with it came a couple of stalwart assistants of the provost-marshal.

"What's all this?" asked one of them, in a peremptory tone. "Leave that lad alone, you old rascal!"

"What's he doing to you?" asked the other.

"He won't pay me my wages," said Mariquita, in a whining, piteous voice. "He owes me three shillings."

"I don't, you lying little ragamuffin! I only took you on trial."

"He does; and he was beating me, ill-using me," went on Mariquita.

"We can't have no disturbance here," said one of the provost-marshal's men. "You must come before the provost, both of you; he'll settle your case in a brace of shakes. Bill, you bring the old man; I'll take charge of the youngster."

And the two guardians of order marched their prisoners through the hut-town to a wooden building at the end, where Major Shervinton dealt out a simple, rough-and-ready justice to the turbulent characters he ruled.

This was precisely what Mariquita had hoped for. What she sought at all hazards was to gain speech of the provost-marshal.

They had to wait for him half-an-hour, and when he appeared there were other cases to be dealt with first.

When it came to Valetta Joe's turn, he stoutly denied the charge of defrauding and ill-using the lad.

"I don't know about the wages, sir," said one of the

assistants, "but we caught him in the act of cuffing the boy."

"What does he owe you, my lad?" asked Major Shervinton.

"Nothing," replied Mariquita, trembling and in very imperfect English. "I only wanted to get him here to denounce him as a friend of the Russians and a spy."

"There's not a word of truth in what he says!" cried Joe, looking at her with open-mouthed astonishment.

"We have long had our eye upon you, my friend, you know that; and I shall inquire into this more closely."

"At this moment there is a man—his name is Benito Villegas—in the bakehouse below the shop," said Mariquita. "He is wounded; you will find him there. Go and seize him; make him tell you what he has done with the English officer, Mr. McKay."

"Mr. McKay!" said the provost-marshal, deeply interested at once. "He is absent—missing! Have you heard anything of him or his fate?"

"Make Benito tell you. He has betrayed him into the Russians' hands."

"This is very important intelligence. What you say shall be verified at once. See to the prisoners, one of you, and let some one come with me to Joe's shop."

Major Shervinton made short work of Benito.

“Look here, my fine fellow, you had better make a clean breast of it all. What have you done with Mr. McKay?”

Benito shook his head, groaned, and pointed to his wounded arm.

“I see you have been hit; but that won't prevent your talking. Tell me exactly what happened—it's your only chance; if you don't, we will wait till your arm is healed, and then hang you here in the middle of the hut-town. Come, speak out.”

“You will spare my life if I tell you?”

“Perhaps: if it is the truth. We shall have means of finding out. But look sharp!”

In feeble, faltering accents Benito told his story, laying stress on the villainy of others and making light of the part he had himself played.

While the provost - marshal was examining the trembling wretch his assistants had been making a thorough search of the shop. They came presently to their chief, laden with a number of papers: letters, passes signed by Gortschakoff, and other documents of a compromising character, plainly proving that this place had long been the centre of a cunningly-devised secret correspondence with the enemy.

“There's enough to hang you both, and perhaps others too, at home. As for you,” he turned to Benito, “I will have you removed to the Balaclava hospital. You will be better looked after there, and we shall have you under our hands when required. Your

accomplice, the commander-in-chief will deal with, I trust, very summarily ; we have overwhelming proofs of his guilt."

Major Shervinton returned to his office, where the prisoners anxiously awaited his verdict.

"Take Joe away, and put a double sentry over him. I shall ride over to headquarters to report the whole case."

"Oh, good, kind, beneficent sir," began Joe, wringing his hands, "spare me! There no word of truth in all this. I done nothing, I swear. I unjustly accused. I ——"

"March him out," said Shervinton. "Such vermin as you must be ruthlessly destroyed.

"And the lad, sir?" asked an assistant.

"To be sure ; I had forgotten. Well, boy, you have behaved uncommonly well. What shall we do for you?"

"Nothing," she faltered out, "only save him—save Mr. McKay."

"Mr. McKay! Do you know him? What—when ——?" asked Major Shervinton, greatly surprised at the agonised accents in which Mariquita spoke, yet more, seeing that her eyes were filled with tears. "Who are you? Where do you come from?" he went on, examining the little creature attentively.

He noticed now for the first time the delicate skin, the clear-cut, regular features, the lustrous eyes ; he remarked the fragile form, the shy, shrinking manner

of the lad, who stood diffidently, deprecatingly, before him, and he said to himself, "What an exceedingly handsome boy! Boy!" he repeated, and now suddenly a doubt crossed his mind as to the proper sex of the young person who evinced such a tender interest in Stanislas McKay.

"Some secret romance, probably," he went on, smiling at the thought, but quickly changing his mood as he remembered how tragic its end was likely to be.

"I will do all I can to save him, rest assured," he went on aloud, "and if we recover him from the clutches of the enemy he shall certainly know how much he owes to you."

The vivid blush that overspread her cheeks at these words betrayed her completely.

"But, my poor child," went on the provost-marshal, in a kindly, sympathetic voice, "what are we to do with you? It was madness, surely, for you to venture here. Have you any friends? Let me see you safe back to them. Where do you live?"

Mariquita in a low voice explained that she was employed at Mother Charcoal's.

"Does she know about you?"

"Yes," acknowledged Mariquita, in a still lower, almost inaudible voice.

"She is a good old soul, and may be trusted to take care of you. Still, her canteen is no place for such as you. You shall stay with her, but only till we can

send you on to one of the troopships with female nurses on board."

Having thus decided, Shervinton himself escorted Mariquita to Mother Charcoal's, and then rode on to headquarters.

He arrived there half-an-hour after Colonel Blythe, and the news he brought threw fresh light upon the disappearance of poor McKay.

"There is a woman at the bottom of it, of course," said Sir Richard Airey. "These papers prove it," putting his finger upon the bundle Shervinton had seized at the Maltese baker's.

"Two women, unless I'm much mistaken," replied the provost-marshal, and he went on to tell of Mariquita's devotion.

"Devotion, indeed," said the general, "but to no purpose, I fear. We have little hope of saving McKay. Lord Raglan is in despair. Prince Gortschakoff refuses distinctly to surrender the poor fellow, or spare his life."

"One woman's devotion outmatched by another's reckless greed. But, should McKay be sacrificed, she—his murderess—must not escape," said Blythe, hotly.

"Ah! but how shall we lay hands on her? Who knows her?" asked Sir Richard.

"One of my officers—Hyde. We shall get her through him," and Blythe repeated what the old quartermaster had said that morning.

"Yes, he evidently knows. He would be the best

man to pursue her—to bring her to judgment for her villanies. There is enough in these papers to convict her. But he could hardly leave the Crimea just now.”

“He happens at this moment to be going down to Scutari, on sick leave : he could easily go on.”

“Is he strong enough ? ”

“He is gaining strength daily ; it is only a wounded arm.”

“That will be best. I will arrange with Lord Raglan to give him leave, provided he will accept the mission.”

Without further delay Blythe went back to his camp and told Hyde all that had occurred.

“Go ! Of course I will go. This very day, if the doctor will let me. I will unmask her ; I will spoil her game. If I cannot save Stanislas, at least she shall not benefit by her crime.”

“You are sure you can find her ? ”

“Trust me ! People in her position are easily found. The first Court Guide will give you her address. She holds her head high, and must pay the penalty of greatness.”

The prospect of starting soon for England on such an errand seemed to restore Hyde to energy and strength.

“Not fit to travel ! ” he said to the doctor, who still expressed some doubts on that head. “Why, I am fit for anything.”

“Nonsense, man ! You won't be able to use your arm for weeks.”

“I shan’t want it. My head’s sound and clear; that’s the chief thing. The moment I get my leave and my orders, I’m off.”

They gave Hyde a passage home in the *Himalaya*, a man-of-war transport, and at that time one of the swiftest steamers afloat. At the most, the journey would not occupy more than twelve days or a fortnight. He might not be able or in time to do much for Stanislas in his present peril, but he at least hoped that retribution might follow fast on the betrayal of his friend.

CHAPTER VII.

INSIDE THE FORTRESS.

It is time to return to Stanislas McKay, whose life, forfeited under the ruthless laws of a semi-barbarous power, still hung by a thread.

He had been taken into Sebastopol by his escort at a rapid pace. It was a ride of half-a-dozen miles, no more, and the greater part of it, when once they regained the Tchernaya, followed the low ground that margins both sides of the river.

McKay could see plainly the English cavalry vedettes in the plain; but, fast bound as he was, it was impossible for him to make any signal to his friends. It was as well that he could not try, for he would certainly have paid the penalty with his life.

They watched him very closely, these wild, unkempt,

half-savage horsemen; watched him as though he were a captive animal—a beast of prey which might at any time break loose and rend them.

But the rough uncivilised Cossacks of the Don were not bad fellows after all.

Although they at first looked askance at him when he spoke to them, these simple boors were presently won over by the distress and sufferings of their prisoner.

McKay was in great pain; his bonds cut into his flesh, he was exhausted by the night's work, dejected at the ruin of his enterprise, uneasy as to his fate.

No food had crossed his lips for many hours, his throat was parched and dry under the fierce heat of the sun.

He begged piteously for water, speaking in Russian, and using the most familiar style of address. The men who rode on each side of him soon thawed as he called them "his little fathers," and implored them to give him a drink.

"Presently, at the first halt," they said.

And so he had to battle with his thirst while they still hurried on.

Suddenly the officer in command called a halt—they had now reached the picket-house at Tractir Bridge—and rode out to the flank of the party. He seemed perturbed, anxious in his mind, and raised his hand to shroud his eyes as he peered eagerly across the plain.

“Here!” he shouted, rising in his stirrups and turning round. “Bring up the prisoner.”

McKay was led to his side.

“What is the meaning of that?” asked the officer haughtily, speaking in French, as he pointed to a cloud of dust in the distant plain.

“How can I tell you?” replied McKay, shortly: but in his own mind he was certain that this was the contemplated extension of the French and Sardinian lines towards the Tchernaya. For a moment his heart beat high with the hope that this movement might help him to escape.

“You know, you rogue! Tell me, or it will be the worse for you.”

“I don’t know,” replied McKay stoutly; “and if I did I should not tell you.”

“Dirty spy! You would have sold us for a price, do the same now by the others. You owe them no allegiance; besides, you are in our power. Tell me, and I will let you go.”

“Your bribe is wasted on me. I am a British officer ——”

“Pshaw! Officer?” and the fellow raised his whip to strike McKay, but happily held his hand.

“Here! take him back,” he said angrily, and McKay was again placed in the midst of the party.

He renewed his entreaties for a drink, and a Cossack, taking pity on him, offered him a canteen.

It was full of *vodkhi*, an ardent spirit beloved by the Russian peasant, half-a-dozen drops of which McKay managed to gulp down, but they nearly burned his throat.

“Water! water!” he asked again.

And the Cossack, evidently surprised at his want of taste, substituted the simpler fluid; but the charitable act drew down upon him the displeasure of his chief.

“How dare you! without my permission?” cried the officer, as he dashed the water from McKay’s lips, and punished the offending Cossack by a few sharp strokes with his whip.

“Come, fall in!” the officer next said. “It won’t do to linger here.” And the party resumed their ride, still in the valley, but as far as possible from the stream.

Every yard McKay’s hopes sank lower and lower; every yard took him further from his friends, who were advancing, he felt certain, towards the river. Large bodies of troops, columns of infantry on the march, covered by cavalry and accompanied by guns, were now perfectly visible in the distant plain.

“Look to your front!” cried the Russian officer peremptorily to Stanislas, as he stole a furtive, lingering glance back. “Faster! Spur your horses, or we may be picked up or shot.”

All hope was gone now. This was the end of the Tchernaya valley. Up there opposite were the Inker-man heights, the sloping hills that a few months before

McKay had helped to hold. This paved, much-worn causeway was the "Sappers' Road," leading round the top of the harbour into the town.

No one stopped the Cossacks.

They passed a picket in a half-ruined guardhouse, the roof of which, its door, walls, and windows, were torn and shattered in the fierce and frequent bombardments. Even at that moment a round shot crashed over their heads, took the ground further off, and bounded away. The sentry asked no questions. Some one looked out and waved his hand in greeting to the Cossack officer, who replied, pointing ahead, as the party rode rapidly on.

Time pressed; it promised to be a warm morning. The besiegers' fire, intended no doubt to distract attention from the movements in the Tchernaya, was constantly increasing.

"What dog's errand is this they sent me on?" growled the Cossack officer, as a shell burst close to him and killed one of the escort.

"Faster! faster!"

And still, harassed by shot and shell, they pushed on.

All this time the road led by the water's edge; but presently they left it, and, crossing the head of a creek, mounted a steep hill, which brought them to the Karabel suburb, as it was called, a detached part of the main town, now utterly wrecked and ruined by the besiegers' fire.

The Cossack officer made his way to a large barrack

occupying a central elevated position, and dismounted at the principal doorway.

“Is it thou, Stoschberg?” cried a friend who came out to meet him. “Here, in Sebastopol?”

“To my sorrow. Where is the general? I have news for him. The enemy are moving in force upon the Tchernaya.”

“Ha! is it so? And that has brought you here?”

“That, and the escort of yonder villain—a rascally spy, whom we caught last night in our lines.”

“Bring him along too; the general may wish to question him.”

McKay was unbound, ordered to dismount, and then, still under escort, was marched into the building. It was roofless, but an inner chamber had been constructed—a cellar, so to speak—under the ground-floor, with a roof of its own of rammed earth many feet thick, supported by heavy beams. This was one of the famous casemates invented by Todleben, impervious to shot and shell, and affording a safe shelter to the troops.

McKay was halted at the door or aperture, across which hung a common yellow rug. The officers passed in, and their voices, with others, were heard in animated discussion, which lasted some minutes; then the one called Stoschberg came out and fetched McKay.

He found himself in an underground apartment plainly but comfortably furnished. In the centre, under a hanging lamp, was a large table covered with maps and plans, and at the table sat a tall, handsome

man, still in the prime of life. He was dressed in the usual long plain great-coat of coarse drab cloth, but he had shoulder-straps of broad gold lace, and his flat muffin cap lying in front of him was similarly ornamented. This personage, an officer of rank evidently, looked up sharply, and addressed McKay in French.

“What is the meaning of this movement in the Tchernaya?” he asked. “You understand French of course? People of your trade speak all tongues.”

“I speak French,” replied McKay, “but English is my native tongue. I am a British officer ——”

“I have told you of his pretensions, Excellency,” interposed the Cossack officer.

“Yes, yes! this is mere waste of time. What is the meaning of this movement in the Tchernaya, I repeat? Tell me, and I may save your life.”

“You have no right to ask me that question, and I decline to answer it, whatever the risk.”

“An obstinate fellow, truly!” said the general, half to himself. “What do you call yourself?”

Then followed a conversation very similar to that which had taken place at Tchorgoun.

“I, too, knew your father,” said the general, shaking his head. “It is a bad case; I fear you must expect the worst.”

“I shall meet it as a soldier should,” replied McKay, stoutly. “But I shall always protest, even with my dying breath, that I have been foully and shamefully

used. I appeal to you, a Russian officer of high rank, of whose name I am ignorant —— ”

“ My name is Todleben, of the Imperial Engineers.”

McKay started, and, notwithstanding the imminent peril of his position, looked with interest upon the man who was known, even in the British lines, as the heart and soul of the defence.

“ I appeal to you, sir,” he pleaded, “ as a general officer, a man of high honour and known integrity, to protect me from outrage.”

“ I can do nothing,” replied Todleben, gravely, shrugging his shoulders. “ The Prince himself will decide. Take him away. I cannot waste time with him if he is not disposed to speak. Let him be kept a close prisoner until the Prince is ready to see him.”

The general then bent his head over his plans, and took no further notice of McKay.

Our hero was again marched into the yard, made to remount, re-bound, and led off towards the principal part of the town. They now skirted the ridge of the Karabel suburb, and began to descend. Half way down they came upon a series of excavations in the side of the hill. These were old caves that had been enlarged and strengthened with timbers and earth. Each had its own doorway, a massive piece of palisading. They were used as barracks, casemated, and practically safe during the siege. Into one of these McKay was taken; it was empty; the men who occupied it were on duty

just then at the Creek Battery below. In one corner lay a heap of straw and old blankets, filthy, and infested with the liveliest vermin.

One of the escort pointed to this uninviting bed, and told the prisoner he might rest himself there. McKay, weary and disconsolate, gladly threw himself upon this loathsome couch. They might shoot him next morning, but for the time at least he could forget all his cares in sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE DEAD.

WE have seen how the news of Stanislas McKay's capture by the Russians was communicated to his uncle, Mr. Faulks.

Next day the brief telegram announcing it was published in the morning papers, with many strong comments. Although some blamed the young officer for his rashness, and others held Lord Raglan directly responsible for his loss, all agreed in execrating the vindictive cruelty of the uncompromising foe.

General sympathy was expressed for Mr. McKay; the most august person in the land sent a message of condolence to his mother through Lord Essendine, who added a few kindly words on his own account.

“What curse lies heavy on our line? It seems fatal to come within reach of heirship to the family-honours.

Ere long there will be no Wilders left, and the title of Essendine will become extinct," wrote the old peer to Mrs. McKay. "Your boy, a fine, fearless young fellow, whom I neglected too long and who deserved a nobler fate, is the latest victim. Pray Heaven he may yet escape! I will strive hard to help him in his present dire peril."

Lord Essendine was as good as his word. He had great influence, political and diplomatic: great friends in high place at every court in Europe. Among others, the Russian ambassador at Vienna was under personal obligations to him of long standing, and did not hesitate when called upon to acknowledge the debt.

Telegrams came and went from London to Vienna, from Vienna to St. Petersburg, backwards and forwards day after day, yet nothing was effected by Lord Essendine's anxious, energetic advocacy. The Czar himself was appealed to, but the Autocrat of All the Russias would not deign to intervene. He was inexorable. The law military must take its course. Stanislas McKay was a traitor and the son of a traitor; he had been actually taken red-handed in a new and still deeper treachery, and he must suffer for his crime.

At the end of the first fortnight McKay's relations and friends in England had almost abandoned hope. This was what Mr. Faulks told Mrs. Wilders, who called every day two or three times, always in the deepest distress.

"Poor boy! poor boy!" she said, wringing her

hands. "To be cut off like this! It is too terrible! And nothing—you are sure nothing can be done to save him?"

"Lord Essendine is making the most strenuous efforts; so are we. Even Sir Humphrey Fothergill has been most kind; and the War Minister has repeatedly telegraphed to Lord Raglan to leave no stone unturned."

"And all without effect? It is most sad!" She would have feigned the same excessive grief with the Essendine lawyers, to whom she also paid several visits, but the senior partner's cold eye and cynical smile checked her heroics.

"You will not be the loser by poor McKay's removal," he said, with brutal frankness, one day when she had rather overdone her part.

"As if I thought of that!" she replied, with supreme indignation.

"It is impossible for you not to think of it, my dear madam. It would not be human nature. Why shouldn't you? Mr. McKay was no relation."

"He was my dear dead husband's devoted friend. Nursed him after his wound ——"

"I remember to have heard that, and indeed everything that is good, of Mr. McKay. I feel sure he would have made an excellent Earl of Essendine; more's the pity."

"I trust my son, if he inherits, will worthily maintain the credit of the house."

“So do I, my dear madam,” said old Mr. Burt, with a bow that made the speech a less doubtful compliment.

“When will it be settled? Why do they hesitate? Why delay?” she said to herself passionately, as she went homewards to Thistle Grove. Her friend Mr. Hobson was there, waiting for her; and she repeated the question with a fierce anxiety that proved how closely it concerned her.

“How impatient you grow! Like every woman. Everything must be done at once.”

“I am not safe yet. I begin to doubt.”

“Can’t you trust me? I have assured you it will end as you wish. When have I disappointed you, Lady Lydstone?”

She started at the sound of this name, once familiar, but surrounded now by memories at once painful and terrible.

“It is the rule in your English peerage that when a son becomes a great peer, and the mother is only a commoner, to give her one of the titles. Your Queen does it by prerogative.”

“I might have been Lady Lydstone by right, if I had waited,” she said slowly.

“And you repent it? Bah! it is too late. Be satisfied. You will be rich, a great lady, respected ——”

She made a gesture of dissent.

“Yes; respected. Great ladies always are. You can marry again — whom you please; me, for instance ——”

Again the gesture : dissent mixed with unmistakable disgust.

“ You are not too flattering, Cyprienne. Do not presume on my good-nature, and remember ——”

“ What, pray ? ”

“ What you owe me. I am entitled to claim my reward. You must repay me some day.”

“ By marrying you ? ”

Her voice, as usual, began to tremble when she found herself in antagonism with this man.

“ If that be the price I ask. Why not ? We ought to be happy together. We have so much in common, so many secrets ——”

“ Enough of this ! ” she said shortly, but not bravely.

“ And to be Lady Lydstone’s husband would give me a certain status—a sufficient income. I could help you to educate the boy, whom, by-the-way, I have never seen. Yes ; the notion pleases me. I will be your second—I beg your pardon, your third husband, probably your last.”

“ I must beg of you, Hippolyte, to be careful ; I hear some one coming.”

It was the Swiss butler, who entered rather timidly to say a gentleman had called on important business.

“ What business ? Surely you have not admitted him ? If so, you shall leave my service. You know it is contrary to my express orders.”

“ He said you would see him, madam ; that he came

on the part of a friend, a very ancient friend, whose name I had but to tell you ——”

“What name? Go on, François.”

“The name—it is difficult. Ru——” he spoke very slowly, struggling with the strangeness of the sounds.

“Ru—pert—Gas——”

“Who can this be?” Mrs. Wilders had turned very white and now beckoned Hobson to step out into the garden. “Is it a message from beyond the grave?”

“Coward!” cried her companion contemptuously. “The Seine seldom surrenders its prey. Rupert Gascoigne is dead—drowned, as you know, fourteen years ago.”

“But this visitor knew him—he knows of my connection with him. Else why come in his name? Oh, Hippolyte, I tremble! Help me. Support me in my interview with this strange man.”

“No; it would not be safe. If he knew Rupert Gascoigne, he may, too, have known Ledantec. I will not meet him.”

“Who is the coward now?”

“I do not choose to run unnecessary risks. But I will help you—to this extent. See the man, if you must see him, in the double drawing-room. I will be within call.”

“And earshot? I understand.”

“Well, what can I overhear—about you, at least—that I do not know already? In any case I could help you.”

It was so arranged. Mrs. Wilders bade her servant introduce the stranger, and presently joined him in the adjoining room.

“Mr. Hyde,” she began, composedly and very stiffly, “may I inquire the meaning of this intrusion? You are a perfect stranger ——”

“Look well at me, Cyprienne Vergette. Have years so changed me ——?”

“Rupert? Impossible!” she half-shrieked. “Rupert is dead. He died—was drowned—when ——”

“You deserted him, and left him, you and your vile partner, falsely accused of a foul crime.”

“I cannot—will not believe it. You are an impostor; you have assumed a dead man’s name.”

“My identity is easily proved, Cyprienne Vergette, and the relation in which I stand to you.”

“What brings you here to vex me, after all these years? I always hated you. I left you—Why cannot you leave me in peace?”

“God knows I had no wish to see or speak to you again. The world was wide enough for us both. We should have remained for ever apart, but for your latest and foulest crime.”

“What false, lying charge is this you would trump up against me?”

“The murder of my dearest friend and comrade. Murder twice attempted. The first failed; the second, I fear, will prove fatal. If so, look to yourself, madam.”

“What can you do?” she said, impudently, having regained much of her old effrontery.

“Prevent you from reaping the fruits of your iniquity. You know you were never General Wilders’s wife; you were always mine. Worse luck!”

“You cannot prove it. You are dead. You dare not reappear.”

“Wait and see,” he replied, very coolly.

“You have no proofs, I say, of the marriage.”

“They are safe at the Mairie, in Paris. French archives are carefully kept. I have only to ask for a certificate; it’s easy enough.”

“For any one who could go there. But how will you dare to show yourself in Paris? You are proscribed; a price is set on your head. Your life would be forfeited.”

“I will risk all that, and more, to ruin your wicked game.”

“Do so at your peril.”

“You threaten me, vile wretch? Be careful. The measure of your iniquity is nearly full. Punishment must soon overtake you; your misdeeds are well known; your complicity with——”

Why should he tell her? Why warn her of the net that was closing round her, and thus help her to escape from the toils?

But she had caught at his words.

“Complicity?” she repeated, anxiously. “With whom?”

“No matter. Only look to yourself. It is war, war to the knife, unquenchable war between us, remember that.”

And with these words he left the house.

Although she had shown a bold front, Mrs. Wilders, as we shall still call her, was greatly agitated by this stormy scene; and it was with a blanched cheek and faltering step that she sought her confederate in the next room.

Mr. Hobson was gone.

“Coward! he has easily taken alarm. To desert me at the moment that I most need advice and help!”

But she did her friend injustice, as a letter that came from him in the course of a few hours fully proved.

“I heard enough,” wrote Mr. Hobson, “to satisfy me that the devil is unchained and means mischief. I never thought to see R. G. again. We must watch him now closely, and know all his movements. If he goes to Paris, as I heard him threaten, he will give himself into our hands. I shall follow, in spite of the risks I run. One word of warning to the Prefecture will put the police on his track. Arrest, removal to Mazas, Cayenne, or by the guillotine—what matter which?—will be his inevitable fate. The French law is implacable. His *dossier* (criminal biography) is in the hands of the authorities, and will be easily produced. There must be numbers of people still living in Paris

who could identify him at once, in spite of his beard and bronzed face. I can, if need be, although I would rather not make myself too prominent just now. Be tranquil ; he will not be able to injure us. It is his own doom that he is preparing."

CHAPTER IX.

IN PARIS.

YEARS had passed since Hyde—he was Rupert Gascoigne then—had last been in Paris. The memory of that last sojourn and the horrors of it still clung to him—his arrest, unjust trial, escape. His bold leap into the swift Seine, his rescue by a passing river steamer, on which, thanks to a plausible tale, in which he explained away the slight flesh-wound he had received from the gendarme's pistol, he found employment as a stoker, and so got to Rouen, thence to Havre and the sea.

Willingly he would never have returned to the place where he had so nearly fallen a victim. But he was impelled by a stern sense of duty ; he came now as an avenging spirit to unmask and punish those who had

plotted against him and his friend—unscrupulous miscreants who were a curse to the world.

He took up his quarters in a large new hotel upon the Boulevards.

Paris had changed greatly in these years. The Second Empire, with its swarm of hastily-enriched adventurers, had already done much to beautify and improve the city. Life was more than ever gay in this the chief home of pleasure-seekers. Luxury of the showiest kind everywhere in the ascendant; smart equipages and gaily-dressed crowds, the shop-fronts glittering with artistic treasures, every one outwardly happy, and leading a careless, joyous existence.

Englishmen, officers especially, were just now welcome guests in Paris. Mr. Hyde, of the Royal Picts, as he entered himself upon the hotel register, with his soldierly air, his Crimean beard, and his arm in a sling, attracted general attention. He was treated with extraordinary politeness everywhere by the most polite people in the world. When he asked a question a dozen answers were ready for him—a dozen officious friends were prepared to escort him anywhere.

But Rupert Hyde wanted no one to teach him his way about Paris. Within an hour of his arrival, after he had hastily changed the garments he had worn on the night journey, had sallied forth, and, entering the long Rue Lafayette, made straight to the headquarters of the 21st *arrondissement*. Urgent business of a public

nature had brought him to Paris, but this was a private matter which he desired to dispose of before he attended to anything else.

The place he sought was easily found. It was a plain gateway of yellowish-white stone, over which hung a brand-new tricolour from a flag-staff fixed at an angle, and on either side a striped sentry-box containing a *Garde de Paris*.

The gateway led into a court-yard, in which were half-a-dozen loungers, clustered chiefly around the entrance to a handsome flight of stone steps within the building.

Just within this second entrance was a functionary, half beadle, half hall-porter, wearing a low-crowned cocked hat and a suit of bright blue cloth plentifully adorned with buttons, to whom Hyde addressed himself.

“The office of M. the Mayor, if you please.”

“Upstairs; take the first turn to the right, and then ——”

“But surely I know that voice!” said some one behind Hyde, who had turned round quickly.

“What, you!” went on the speaker; “my excellent English comrade—here in Paris! Oh, joyful surprise!”

“Is it you? M. Anatole Belhomme, of the Voltigeurs? You have left the Crimea? Is Sebastopol taken? the Russians all massacred, then?”

“It is I who was massacred—almost. I received a

ball, here in my leg, and was invalided last month. But you also have suffered, comrade." And Anatole pointed to Hyde's arm in a sling. .

"Nothing much. Only the kick of a horse ; it does not prevent me moving about, as you see."

"But what brings you to Paris, my good friend ?"

"I am seeking some family documents—to substantiate an inheritance. They are here in the archives of the Mairie."

"How? You were seeking the office of M. the Mayor? You?" And M. Anatole proceeded to scrutinise Hyde slowly and minutely from head to foot. "You, a veteran with your arm in a sling, and that brown beard—brown mixed with grey. It is strange—most strange."

"Well, comrade," replied Hyde, laughing a little uneasily, "you ought to know me again."

"Lose no time, friend, in getting what you want from the Mairie. Come: I will go with you. Come: you may be prevented if you delay."

These words aroused Hyde's suspicions. Had Cyprienne warned the French police to be on the lookout for him?

"But, Anatole, explain. Why do you lay such stress on this?" he asked.

"Do as I tell you—first, the papers. I will explain by-and-by."

There was no mistaking Anatole, and Hyde accordingly hastened upstairs. Anatole indicated the door of

an ante-chamber, which Hyde entered alone. It was a large, bare room, with a long counter—inside were a couple of desks, and at them sat several clerks—small people wielding a very brief authority—who looked contemptuously at him over their ledgers, and allowed him to stand there waiting without the slightest acknowledgment of his existence for nearly a quarter of an hour.

“I have come for a certificated extract from the registers of a civil marriage contracted here on the 27th April, 184—” he said, at length, in a loud, indignant voice.

The inquiry had the effect of an electrical shock. Two clerks at once jumped from their stools; one went into an inner room, the other came to the counter where Hyde stood.

“Your name?” he asked, abruptly. “Your papers, domicile, place of birth, age. The names of the parties to the contract of marriage.”

Hyde replied without hesitation, producing his passport, a new one made out in the name of Hyde, describing his appearance, and setting forth his condition as an officer in Her Britannic Majesty’s Regiment of Royal Picts.

While he was thus engaged, an elderly, portly personage, wearing a tricolour sash which was just visible under his waistcoat, came out from the inner room, and, taking up the passport, looked at it, and then at Hyde.

“Is that your name? Yes? It is different,” he went on, audibly, but to himself, “although the description tallies. You are an English officer, domiciled at the Hôtel Impérial, Boulevard de la Madeleine. I do not quite understand.”

“Surely it is only a simple matter!” pleaded Hyde. “Monsieur, I seek a marriage certificate.”

“For what purpose?”

“As a claim for an inheritance.”

“Nothing more, eh!” said the Mayor, suspiciously. “Have you any one, any friend, who will answer for you, here?”

“No one nearer than the British Embassy, except—to be sure ——” he suddenly thought of Anatole, who still waited outside, and who came in at the summons of his friend.

“Oh, you are with Monsieur?” The official’s face brightened the moment he saw Anatole. “It is all right, then. Give the gentleman the certificate. This friend”—he laid the slightest stress on the word—“will be answerable for him, of course.”

“Now, Anatole, tell me what all this means,” said Hyde, as he left the Mairie with the document he deemed of so much importance in his pocket.

“Not here,” said the Frenchman, looking over his shoulder, nervously. “Let us go somewhere out of sight.”

“The nearest wine-shop—I have not breakfasted yet, have you? A bottle of red seal would suit you,

I dare say," said Hyde, remembering Anatole's little weakness.

"It is not to be refused. I am with you, comrade. At the sign of the 'Pinched Nose' we shall find the best of everything," replied Anatole, heartily, and the pair passed into the street.

It was barely a dozen yards to the wine-shop, and they walked there arm-in-arm in boisterous good-fellowship, elbowing their way through the crowd in a manner that was not exactly popular.

"Take care, imbecile!" cried one hulking fellow whom Anatole had shouldered off the path.

"Make room, then," replied our friend, rudely.

"Would you dare ——" began the other, in a menacing voice, adding some words in a lower tone.

"Excuse. I was in the wrong," said Anatole, suddenly humbled.

"You are right to avoid a quarrel," remarked Hyde, when they were seated at table. He had been quietly amused at his companion's easy surrender.

"I could have eaten him raw. But why should I? He is, perhaps, a father of a family—the support of a widowed mother: if I had destroyed him they might have come to want. No; let him go."

"All the same, he does not seem inclined to go. There he is, still lurking about the front of the shop."

"Truly? Where?" asked Anatole, in evident perturbation. "Bah! we will tire him of that. By the time we have finished a second bottle ——"

“Or a third, if you will!” cried Hyde, cheerfully.

They had their breakfast—the most savoury dishes; ham and sour crout, tripe after the mode of Caen, rich ripe Roquefort cheese, and had disposed of three bottles of a rather rough but potent red wine, before Anatole would speak on any but the most commonplace topics. The Crimea, the dreadful winter, the punishment administered to their common enemy, occupied him exclusively.

But with the fourth bottle he became more communicative.

“You owe a long candle to your saint for your luck to-day in meeting me,” he said, with a slight hiccup.

“Ah! how so?”

“Had not I been there to give you protection you would now be under lock and key in the dépôt of the Prefecture.”

Hyde, in spite of himself, shuddered as he thought of his last detention in that unsavoury prison.

“What, then, have you done, my English friend?” went on Anatole, with drunken solemnity. “Why should the police seek your arrest?”

“But do they? I cannot believe it.”

“It is as I tell you. I myself am in the ‘cuisine’ (the Prefecture). Since my return from the war my illustrious services have been rewarded by an appointment of great trust.”

“In other words, you are now a police-agent, and you were set to watch for some one like me.”

“Why not you?” asked Anatole, trying, but in vain, to fix him with his watery eyes. “In any case,” he went on, “I wish to serve a comrade—at risk to myself, perhaps.”

“You shall not suffer for it, never fear, in the long run. Count always upon me.”

“They may say that I have betrayed my trust; that I put friendship before duty. That has always been my error; I have too soft a heart.”

Anatole now began to cry with emotion at his own chivalrous self-sacrifice, which changed quickly into bravado as he cried, striking the table noisily—

“Who cares? I would save you from the Prefect himself.”

At this moment the big man who had been watching at the window returned, accompanied by two others. He walked straight towards the door of the wineshop.

“*Sacré bleu! le patron* (chief). You are lost! Quick! take me by the throat.”

Hyde jumped to his feet and promptly obeyed the curious command.

“Now struggle; throw me to the ground, bolt through the back door,” whispered Anatole, hastily.

All which Hyde executed promptly and punctiliously. Anatole suffered him to do as he pleased, and Hyde escaped through the back entrance just as the other policemen rushed in at the front.

“After him! Run! Fifty francs to whoever stops him!”

But Hyde had the heels of them. He ran out and through a little courtyard at the back communicating with the street. There he found a *fiacre*, into which he jumped, shouting to the cabman—

“Drive on straight ahead! A napoleon for yourself.”

In this way he distanced his pursuers, and half-an-hour later regained his hotel by a long detour.

Rather agitated and exhausted by the events of the morning, Hyde went upstairs to his own room to rest and review his situation.

“It is quite evident,” he said to himself, “that Cyprienne has tried to turn the tables on me. I was too open with her. It was incautious of me to show my hand so soon. Of course the police have been set upon me—the accused and still unjudged perpetrator of the crime in Tinsplate Street—by her. But has she acted alone in this?”

“I doubt it. I doubt whether she would have come to Paris with that express purpose, or whether the police would have listened to her if she had.

“But who assisted her? Some one from whom she has no secrets. Were it not that such a woman is likely to have set up the closest relations with other miscreants in these past years, I should say that her agent and accomplice was Ledantec. Ledantec is still alive; I know that, for I saw him myself on the field of the Alma, rifling the dead.

“Ledantec! We have an old score to settle, he

and J. What if he should be mixed up in this business that brings me to Paris? It is quite likely. That would explain his presence in the Crimea, which hitherto has seemed so strange. I never could believe that so daring and unscrupulous a villain had degenerated into a camp-follower, hungry for plunder gained in the basest way. It could not have been merely to prey upon the dead that he followed in the wake of our army. Far more likely that he was a secret agent of the enemy. If so then, so still, most probably. What luck if these damaging clues that I hold should lead me also to him!

“But it is evident that I shall do very little if I continue to go about as Rupert Hyde. The police are on the alert: my movements would soon be interfered with, and, although I have no fear now of being unable to prove my innocence, arrest and detention of any kind might altogether spoil my game.

“I must assume some disguise, and to protect myself and my case I will do so with the full knowledge of the Embassy. It will do if I go there within an hour. By this evening at latest the police will certainly be here after Rupert Hyde.”

It must be mentioned here that the police of Paris are supposed to be acquainted with the names of all visitors residing in the city. The rule may be occasionally relaxed, as now, but under the despotism of Napoleon III. it was enforced with a rigorous exactitude.

Hyde had been barely half-a-dozen hours in Paris, but already his name was inscribed upon the hotel-register awaiting the inspection of the police, who would undoubtedly call that same day to note all new arrivals.

Before starting for the Embassy, Hyde sat down and wrote a couple of rather lengthy letters, both for England, which he addressed, and himself posted at the corner of the Rue Royale.

Thence he went on, down the Faubourg St. Honoré, not many hundred yards, and soon passed under the gateway ornamented with the arms of Great Britain, and stood upon what, by international agreement, was deemed a strip of British soil.

He saw an *attaché*, to whom he quickly explained himself.

“You wish to pursue the investigation yourself, I gather? Is it worth while running such a risk? Why not hand over the whole business to the Prefecture? I believe they have already put a watch upon the persons suspected.”

“I have no confidence in their doing it as surely as I would myself.”

Hyde, it will be understood, had his own reasons for not wishing to present himself at the Prefecture.

“You propose to assume a disguise? As you please; but how can we help you?”

“By giving me papers in exchange for my passport,

which you can hold, and by sending after me if I do not reappear within two or three days."

"You anticipate trouble, then; danger, perhaps."

"Not necessarily, but it is as well to take precautions."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes; I should like to bring my disguise and put it on here. In the porter's lodge, a back office—anywhere."

The *attaché* promised to get the ambassador's permission, which was accorded in due course, and that same afternoon Hyde entered the Embassy a well-dressed English gentleman, and came out an evil-looking ruffian, wearing the blue blouse and high silk cap of the working classes. One sleeve of the blouse hung loose across his chest, as though he had lost his arm, but his injured limb was safe underneath the garment. His beard was trimmed close, and on either side of his forehead were two great curls, plastered flat on the temple, after the fashion so popular with French roughs.

In this attire he plunged into the lowest depths of the city.

Amongst the papers seized at the Maltese baker's in Kadikoi were several that gave an address in Paris. This place was referred to constantly as the headquarters of the organisation which supplied the Russian enemy with intelligence, and at which a certain mys-

terious person—the leading spirit evidently of the whole nefarious company—was to be found.

“I’ll find out all about him and his confederates before I’m many hours older,” said Hyde, confidently, as he presented himself at the porter’s lodge of a tall, six-storied house, of mean and forbidding aspect, close to the Faubourg St. Martin. It was let out in small lodgings to tenants as decayed and disreputable as their domicile.

“M. Sabatier?” asked Hyde, boldly, of the porter.

“On the fifth floor, the third door to the right,” was the reply.

Hyde mounted the stairs and knocked at the door indicated.

“Well?” asked an old woman who opened it.

“The patron—is he here? I must speak to him.”

“Who are you? What brings you?” The old woman still held the door ajar, and denied him admission.

“I have news from the Crimea—important news—from the Maltese.”

“Joe?” asked the old woman, still suspicious.

Hyde nodded, and said sharply—

“Be quick! The patron must know at once. You will have to answer for this delay.”

“He is absent—come again to-morrow,” replied the old woman, sulkily.

“It will be worse for him—for all of us—if he does not see me at once.”

"I tell you he is absent. You must come again;" and with that the woman shut the door in his face.

What was Hyde to do now? Watch outside? That would hardly be safe. The police, he knew, were on the look-out already, and they would be suspicious of any one engaged in the same game.

There was nothing for it but to take the old woman's reply for truth and wait till the following day. Hyde knew his Paris well enough to find a third-class hotel or lodging-house suitable for such a man as he now seemed, and here, after wandering through the streets for hours, dining at a low restaurant and visiting the gallery of a theatre, he sought and easily obtained a bed.

Next day he returned to the Faubourg St. Martin and was met with the same answer. The patron was still absent.

Hyde was beginning to despair; but he resolved to wait one more day, intending, if still unsuccessful, to surrender the business to other hands.

But on the third day he was admitted.

"The patron will see you," said the old woman, as she led him into a small but well-lighted room communicating with another, into which she passed, locking the door behind her.

They kept him waiting ten minutes or more, during which he had an uncomfortable feeling he was being watched, although he could not tell exactly how or from where.

There was really a small eye-hole in the wall opposite, of the kind called in French a "Judas," and such as is used in prisons to observe the inmates of the cells. Through this, Hyde had been subjected to a long and patient examination.

It was apparently satisfactory; for presently the inner door was unlocked, and the old woman returned, followed by a man whom we have seen before.

It was Mr. Hobson in person; Ledantec really, as Hyde immediately saw, in spite of the smug, smooth exterior, the British-cut whiskers, and the unmistakable British garb.

"Here is the patron," said the old woman; "tell him what you have to say."

Hyde, addressing himself to Mr. Hobson, began his story in the most perfect French he could command. He spoke the language well, and had no reason to fear that his accent would betray him.

"The patron speaks no French," put in the old woman. "You ought to know that. Tell me, and I will interpret."

Mr. Hobson played his part closely, that was clear. A Frenchman by birth, he could hardly be ignorant of or have forgotten his own tongue.

Hyde, following these instructions, told his story in the briefest words. How Valetta Joe had been seized, his shop ransacked, and many compromising papers brought to light.

"Ask him how he knows this," said Mr. Hobson quietly.

"My brother has written to me from the Crimea. He was in the camp when the baker was seized."

"What is his brother's name?"

"Eugène Chabot, of the 39th Algerian battalion."

This was a name given in the papers seized.

"Was it he who gave this address? How did the fellow come here? Ask him that."

"Yes," Hyde said; he had learned the patron's address from his brother, who had urged him to come and tell what had happened without a moment's delay.

Mr. Hobson, *alias* Ledantec, had listened attentively to this friendly message as it was interpreted to him bit by bit, but without betraying the slightest concern. Suddenly he changed his demeanour.

"*Ecoutez-moi!*" he cried in excellent French, looking up and darting a fierce look at the man in front of him. "Listen! You have played a bold game and lost it. You did not hold a sufficiently strong hand."

Hyde stood sullenly silent and unconcerned, but he felt he was discovered.

"In your charming and for the most part veracious story there is only one slight mistake, my good friend."

"I do not understand."

"I will tell you. Eugène Chabot, your brother?—yes; your brother. Well, he could not have written to you as you tell me ——"

“But I assure you ——”

“For the simple reason, that, just one week before the seizure of Valetta Joe, Chabot was killed—in a sortie from the enemy’s lines.”

“Impossible! I ——”

“Have been lying throughout and must take the consequences. You have thrust your head into the lion’s jaw. Hold!”

Seeing that Hyde had thrust his one hand beneath his blouse, seeking, no doubt, for some concealed weapon, Hobson suddenly struck a bell on the table before him.

Four men rushed in.

“Seize him before he can use his arm! Seize him, and unmask him!”

The ruffians, laying violent hands on Hyde, tore off his blouse and dragged the wig with its elaborate curls from his head. In the struggle he gave a sharp cry of pain. They had touched too roughly the still helpless arm which hung in its sling beneath the blouse.

“Ah! I knew I could not be mistaken. It is you, then, Rupert Gascoigne! I thought I recognised you from the first, although it is years and years since we met.”

“Not quite, villain! Cowardly traitor, murderer, despoiler of the dead!”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That I saw you at your craven work just after the

Alma; you ought to have been shot then. The world would have been well rid of a miscreant."

"Pretty language, truly, Mr. Gascoigne! I must strive to deserve it."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I am not sure. Only do not hope for mercy. You know too much. I might make away with you at once ——"

"But why spill blood?" he went on, musing aloud. "The guillotine will do your business in due course if I hand you over to the law. That will be best, safest; the most complete riddance, perhaps."

There was a pause.

"You see you are altogether in my power," said Ledantec, "either way. But I am not unreasonable. I am prepared to spare you—for the present," he said, with an evil smile—"only for the present, and according as you may behave."

"On what conditions will you spare me—for the present?" asked Hyde, elated at the unexpected chance thus given him.

"Tell me how you came to know of this address. Who sent you here?"

"Valetta Joe, the Maltese baker at Kadikoi."

"Describe him to me," asked Ledantec, to try Hyde.

Hyde had seen Joe more than once in his rides through the hut-town, and his answer was perfectly satisfactory.

“Did he send any message?”

“Just what I have told you. I was to let you know of his arrest and of the danger you would run.”

Ledantec was deceived by the straightforward and unhesitating way in which Hyde told his story.

“It may be so. At any rate, the warning must not be despised. Whether or not you are to be trusted remains to be seen. But I will keep you safe for a day or two longer and see what turns up. In any case you cannot do much mischief to Cyprienne while shut fast here.”

“Cyprienne?” said Hyde, quite innocently.

“I am quite aware of one reason that brought you to Paris, but, as I have said, you cannot well execute your threats so long as we hold you tight.”

Hyde shook his head as though these remarks were completely unintelligible. But he laughed within himself at the thought that he had already outwitted both Cyprienne and her accomplice, and that, wherever he was, a prisoner or at large, events would work out her discomfiture without him.

He had no fears for himself. They had promised him at the British Embassy that he should be sought out if he did not reappear within three days. Besides, the French police had their eyes on the house. The tables would presently be turned upon his captors in a way that they little expected.

When, therefore, he was led by Ledantec's orders into a little back room dimly lighted by a window

looking on to a blank wall, he went like a lamb. But physically he was not particularly comfortable; there were pleasanter ways of spending the day than tied hand and foot to the legs of a bedstead, and Ledantec's farewell speech was calculated to disturb his equanimity.

"Don't make a sound or a move, mind. If you do——" and he produced a glittering knife, with a look that could not be misunderstood.

CHAPTER X.

SUSPENSE.

McKAY must have slept for many hours. Daylight was fading, and the den he occupied was nearly dark, when he was aroused by the voices of his Russian fellow-lodgers coming off duty for the night.

They were rough, simple fellows most of them: boorish peasants torn from their village homes, and forced to fight in their Czar's quarrel, which he was pleased to call a holy war. Coarse, uncultivated, but not unkindly, and they gathered around McKay, staring curiously at him, and plying him with questions.

His command of their language soon established amicable relations, and presently, when supper was ready, a nauseous mess of *kasha*, or thick oatmeal porridge, boiled with salt pork, they hospitably invited him to partake. He was a prisoner, but an honoured

guest, and they freely pressed their flasks of *vodkhi* upon him when with great difficulty he had swallowed a few spoonfulls of the black porridge.

They talked, too, incessantly, notwithstanding their fatigue, always on the same subject, this interminable siege.

“It’s weary work,” said one. “I long for home.”

“They will never take the place; Father Todleben will see to that. Why do they not go, and leave us in peace?”

“It is killing work: in the batteries day and night; always in danger under this hellish fire. This is the best place. You are better off, comrade, than we” (this was to McKay); “for you are safe under cover here, and in the open a man may be killed at any time.”

“He has dangers of his own to face,” said the under-officer in charge of the barrack, grimly. “Do not envy him till after to-morrow.”

McKay heard these words without emotion. He was too wretched, too much dulled by misfortune and the misery of his present condition, to feel fresh pain.

Yet he slept again, and was in a dazed, half-stupid state when they fetched him out next morning and marched him down to the water’s edge, where he was put into a man-of-war’s boat and rowed across to the north side of the harbour.

Prince Gortschakoff, the Russian commander-in-chief, had sent for him, and about noon he was taken

before the great man, who had his head-quarters in the Star Fort, well out of reach of the besiegers' fire.

The Prince, a portly, imposing figure, of haughty demeanour, and speaking imperiously, accosted McKay very curtly.

"I know all about you. Whether you are spy or traitor matters little: your life is forfeited. But I will spare it on one condition. Tell me unreservedly what is going on in the enemy's lines."

"I should indeed deserve your unjust epithets if I replied," was all McKay's answer.

"What reinforcements have reached the allies lately?" went on the Prince, utterly ignoring McKay's refusal, and looking at him fiercely. "Speak out at once."

Our hero bore the gaze unflinchingly, and said nothing.

"We know that the French Imperial Guard have arrived, and that many new regiments have joined the English. Is an immediate attack contemplated?"

McKay was still silent.

"Ill-conditioned, obstinate fool!" cried the Prince, angrily. "It is your only chance. Speak, or prepare to die!"

"You have no right to press me thus. I refuse distinctly to betray my own side."

"Your own side! You are a Russian—it is your duty to tell us. But I will not bandy words with you. Let him be taken back to a place of safety and await my orders."

Once more McKay gave himself up for lost. When he regained the wretched casemate that was his prison he hardly hoped to leave it, except when summoned for execution.

But that day passed without incident, a second also, and a third. Still our hero found himself alive.

Had they forgotten him? Or were they too busily engaged to attend to so small a matter as sending him out of the world.

The latter seemed most probable. Another bombardment, the most incessant and terrible of any that preceded it, as McKay thought. Although hidden away, so to speak, in the bowels of the earth, he plainly heard the continuous cannonade, the roar of the round-shot, the murderous music of the shells as they sang through the air, and presently exploded with tremendous noise.

He was to have a still livelier experience of the terrible mischief caused by the ceaseless fire of his friends.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day he was called forth, always in imminent peril of his life, and taken round the head of a harbour which was filled with men-of-war, past the Creek Battery, and up into the main town. They halted him at the door of a handsome building, greatly dilapidated by round-shot and shell. This was the naval library, the highest spot in Sebastopol, a centre and focus of danger, but just now occupied by the chiefs of the Russian garrison.

McKay waited, wondering what would happen to

him, and in a few minutes narrowly escaped death more than once. First a shell burst in the street close to him, and two bystanders were struck down by the fragments ; then another shell struck a house opposite, and covered the neighbouring space with splinters large and small ; next a round-shot tore down the thoroughfare, carrying everything before it.

It was no safer inside than out. Yet McKay was glad when they marched him in before the generals, who were seated at the open window of the topmost look-out, scanning the besiegers' operations with their telescopes.

"What is the meaning of this fire ? Have you any idea ?" It was Todleben who asked the question.

"Does it prelude a general attack ?"

"I cannot tell you," replied McKay.

"Was there no talk in the enemy's lines of an expected assault ?" asked another.

"I do not know."

"You must know. You are on the headquarter-staff of the British army."

"Who told you so ? You have always denied my claim to be treated as an English officer."

"Because you are a traitor to your own country. But it is as I say. We know as a fact that you belong to Lord Raglan's staff ; how we know it you need not ask."

The fact was, of course, made patent by the English commander-in-chief, in his repeated attempts to secure

McKay's release and exchange. But the prisoner had been told nothing of these efforts, or of the peremptory refusal that had met Lord Raglan's demands.

"I told you it would be no use," interrupted a third. "He is as obstinate as a mule."

"Stay! what is that?" cried Todleben, suddenly. "Over there, in the direction of the Green Mamelon."

Three rockets were seen to shoot up into the evening sky.

"It is some signal," said another. "Yes; heavy columns are beginning to climb the slopes away there to our left."

"And the British troops are collecting in front of the Quarries."

At this moment the besiegers' fire, which had slackened perceptibly, was re-opened with redoubled strength.

"Let every one return to his station without delay," said Todleben, briefly. "A serious crisis is at hand. The attack points to the Malakoff, which, as you all know, is the key of our position."

"Hush!" said one of the other generals, pointing to McKay.

"What matter?" replied Todleben. "He can hardly hope to pass on the intelligence."

But the words were not lost upon our hero, although he had but little time then to consider their deep meaning.

“What shall we do with the prisoner?” asked his escort.

“Take him back to his place of confinement.”

McKay’s heart was lighter that evening than it had been at any time since his capture. He remembered now that this was the 7th of June, the day settled for the night attack upon the Mamelon and Quarries, and he hoped that if these succeeded, as they must, they would probably be followed by a further assault upon the principal inner defences of the town.

He spent the evening and the greater part of the night in the deepest agitation, hoping hourly, momentarily, for deliverance.

None came, no news even; but that the struggle was being fought out strenuously he knew from the absence of the men that occupied his casemate, all of whom were doubtless engaged. But towards daylight one or two dropped in who had been wounded and forced to retire from the batteries. From them he learnt something of what had occurred.

The French had stormed the works on the left of the Russian front, and had carried them once, twice, three times. The Russians had returned again and again to recover their lost redoubts, but had been obliged to surrender them in the end.

In the same way the English had attacked the ambuscades—what we call the Quarries—and between night and dawn the Russians had made four separate

attempts to recover what had been lost at the first onslaught.

“And now it is over?”

“No one can say. We have suffered fearfully; we are almost broken down. If the enemy presses we shall have to give up the town.”

“Pray God they may come on!” cried McKay, counting the moments till relief came.

But bitter disappointment was again his portion. The day grew on, and, instead of renewed firing, perfect quiet supervened. There was a truce, he was told, on both sides, to bury the dead.

Now followed several dreary days, when hope had sunk again to its lowest ebb, and all his worst apprehensions revived. It was like a living death; he was a close prisoner, and never a word reached him that any of his friends were concerning themselves with his miserable fate.

Again there came a glimpse of hope. Surely there was good cause: in the renewal of the bombardment, which, after an interval of a few days, revived with yet fiercer intention and unwavering persistence.

Surely this meant another—possibly the final—and supreme attack?

The firing continued without intermission for four days. It was increased and intensified by an attack of the allied fleet upon the seaward batteries. This new bombardment made itself evident from the direction of

the sounds, and the merciless execution of the fiery rockets that fell raging into the town.

At length, in the dead of night, McKay was aroused from fitful sleep by the beating of drums and trumpets sounding the assembly.

It was a general alarm. Troops were heard hurrying to their stations from all directions, and in the midst of it all was heard—for a moment there had been a lull in the cannonade—a sharp, long-sustained sound of musketry fire.

Evidently an attack, but on what points it was made, and how it fared, McKay at first could have no idea. But, as he listened anxiously to the sounds of conflict, it was clear that the tide of battle was raging nearer to him now than on any previous occasion.

He waited anxiously, his heart beating faster and faster, as each minute the firing grew nearer and nearer. He was in ignorance of the exact nature of the attack until, as on the last occasion, the Russian soldiers came back by twos and threes and re-entered the casemate.

“What is going on in the front?” McKay asked.

“The enemy are advancing up the ravine. We have been driven out of the cemetery, and I doubt whether we shall hold our ground.”

“They are coming on in thousands!” cried a new arrival. “This place is not safe. Let us fall back to the Karabel barrack.”

“You had better come too,” said one soldier thoughtfully to McKay, as he gathered up the long skirts of his grey great-coat to allow of more expeditious retreat.

“All right,” said McKay, “I will follow.”

And taking advantage of the confusion, during which the sentries on the casemate had withdrawn, he left his prison-chamber and got out into the main road.

The fusilade was now close at hand ; bullets whistled continually around and pinged with a dull thud as they flattened against the rocky ground.

The assailants were making good progress. McKay, as he crouched below a wall on the side of the road, could hear the glad shouts of his comrades as, with short determined rushes, they charged forward from point to point.

His situation was one of imminent peril truly, for he was between two fires. But what did he care? Only a few minutes more, if he could but lie close, and he would be once more surrounded by his own men.

While he waited the dawn broke, and he could watch for himself the progress the assailants made. They were now climbing along the slopes of the ravine on both sides of the harbour, occupying house after house, and maintaining a hot fire on the retreating foe. It was exciting, maddening ; in his eagerness McKay was tempted to emerge from his shelter and wave encouragement to his comrades.

Unhappily for him, the gesture was misunderstood. The crack of half-a-dozen rifles responded promptly, and a couple of them took fatal effect. Poor Stanislas fell, badly wounded, with one bullet in his arm and another in his leg.

CHAPTER XI.

AMONG FRIENDS AGAIN.

McKAY lay where he fell, and it was perhaps well for him that he was prostrate. The attacking parties soon desisted from firing, and charged forward at racing-pace, driving all who stood before them at the point of the bayonet. They swept over and past McKay, trampling him under foot in their hot haste to demolish the foe.

But the wave of the advance left McKay behind it, and well within the shelter of his own people.

Although badly wounded, he was not disabled, and he took advantage of the first pause in the fight to appeal for help to some men of the 38th who occupied the wall behind which he fell.

“You speak English gallows well for a Rooskie,”

said one of the men, brusquely, but not without sympathy. "What do you want? Water? Are you badly hit?"

"A bullet in my leg and a flesh-wound in my arm."

"Hold hard! Sawbones will be up soon. Meanwhile, let's try and staunch the blood. We'll tear up your shirt for a bandage."

And with rough but real kindness he tore open McKay's old *greggo* so as to get at his underlinen. This action betrayed the red cloth waistcoat he still wore.

"Why, that's an English staff waistcoat. Quick! How did you come by it, you murdering rogue?"

"I am a staff officer."

"You! What do you call yourself?"

"Mr. McKay, of the Royal Picts: deputy-assistant-quartermaster-general at headquarters."

"Save us alive! This bangs Bannagher. Wait, honey—wait till I call an officer."

Presently, when the wounds had been rudely but effectively bound up, a captain of the 38th came up, and to him McKay made himself known.

"This is no time or place to ask how you came here. Taken prisoner, I suppose?"

"Who are you? What force?"

"Eyre's Brigade: of the Third Division. Told off to attack the Creek Battery. We have carried the cemetery, but what else we've done I have not the least idea."

“Haven’t you? Well, I’ll tell you. You’ve taken Sebastopol.”

“Not quite, I’m afraid.”

“You’re well inside the fortress anyway. I can tell you that for certain. Just above is the place in which I was kept a prisoner.”

“Is that a fact? By Jove! what tremendous luck!”

“But can you hold your ground?”

“Eyre will. He’ll hold on by his eyelids till reinforcements come up, never fear. And the French have promised us support.”

“Is yours the only attack?”

“Dear no! The French have gone in at the Malakoff, and our people at the Redan.”

“How has it gone—have you any idea?” asked McKay, anxiously.

“No one knows, except the general, perhaps. Here he comes; and he don’t look over pleased.”

General Eyre, a tall, fierce-looking soldier, strode up with a long step, talking excitedly to a staff-officer, whom McKay recognised as one of Lord Raglan’s aides-de-camps.

“Hold our ground!” the general was saying. “Of course we will, to the last. But if the French could only come up in force we might still retrieve the day. You see we are well inside, though I cannot say exactly where.”

At this moment the officer who had been speaking to McKay touched his hat and said to the general—

“There is some one here who can tell you, I think, sir.”

“Who is that? A prisoner?”

“One of our own people. McKay, of the headquarter staff. A man whom the Russians took, and whom we have just recovered.”

“McKay!” cried the aide-de-camp, joyfully. “Where is he?”

Our hero was speedily surrounded by a group of sympathetic friends, to whom he gave a short account of himself. Then he briefly explained to the general the position in which they were.

“It is as I thought,” said the general. “We have pierced the Russian works above the man-of-war harbour, and, if reinforced promptly, can take the whole of the line in reverse. Will you let Lord Raglan know? and the attack might then be renewed on this side.”

“I fear there is no hope of that,” said the aide-de-camp, gloomily.

“Have we failed, then?” asked McKay.

His friend shook his head.

“Completely. I cannot tell why exactly, but I know that part of the French started prematurely. There was some mistake about the signal-rocket. This gave the alarm to the whole garrison.”

“Yes; I heard them turning out in the middle of the night.”

“And the consequence was they were ready for us

at all points. Our attacking parties at the Redan were met with a tremendous fire, and literally mowed down. Our losses have been frightful. All the generals—Sir John Campbell, Lacy, yea, and Shadford—are killed, and ever so many more. It's quite heartbreaking."

"And will nothing more be tried to-day?"

"I fear not, although Lord Raglan is quite ready; but the French are very dispirited. Goodness knows how it will end! The only slice of luck is Eyre's getting in here; but I doubt if he can remain."

"Why not?"

"The enemy's fire is too galling, and it appears to be on the increase."

"I fancy they are bringing the ships' broadsides to bear."

"Yes, and we are bound to suffer severely. But you, McKay; I see you are wounded. We must try and get you to the rear."

"Never mind me," said McKay, pluckily; "I will take my chance and wait my turn."

The chance did not come for many hours. Eyre's brigade continued to be terribly harassed; they were not strong enough to advance, yet they stoutly refused to retire. The enemy's fire continued to deal havoc amongst them; many officers and men were struck down; General Eyre himself was wounded severely in the head.

All this time they waited anxiously for support, but none appeared. At length, as night fell, Colonel

Adams, who had succeeded Eyre in the command, reluctantly decided to fall back.

The retreat was carried out slowly and in perfect order, without molestation from the enemy. Now at last the wounded were removed on stretchers as carefully and tenderly as was possible.

McKay's hurts had been seen to early in the day. He was placed as far as possible out of fire, and his strength maintained by such stimulants as were available.

While the excitement lasted his pluck and endurance held out. But there was a gradual falling-off of fire as the night advanced, and the pains of his wounds increased. He suffered terribly from the motion as he was borne back to camp, and when at last they reached the shelter of a hospital-tent in the Third Division camp he was in a very bad way: fits of wild delirium alternated with death-like insensibility.

But he was once more amongst his friends. Next morning Lord Raglan, notwithstanding his heavy cares and preoccupation, sent over to inquire after him.

Many of the headquarter-staff came too, and Colonel Blythe was constantly at his bedside.

On the second day the bullet was removed from the leg, and from that moment the symptoms became more favourable. Fever abated, and the wounds looked as though they would heal "at the first intention."

"He will do well enough now," said the doctor in

charge of the case ; “ but he will want careful nursing —better, I fear, than he can get in camp.”

“ Why not send him on board a hospital ship ? Could he bear the journey to Balaclava ? ”

“ Undoubtedly. I was going to suggest it.”

“ There is the *Burlington Castle*, his own uncle’s ship ; she is now fitted up as a hospital, with nurses and every appliance. He will soon get well on board her.”

There were other and still more potent aids to convalescence on board the *Burlington Castle*. A band of devoted female nurses tended the sick ; and amongst them, demurely clad in a black dress, her now sad white face half hidden under an immense coif, was one who answered to the name of Miss Hidalgo.

It was Mariquita, placed there by the kindness of the military authorities, anxious to make all the return possible by helping in the good work. The relationship of the captain to Stanislas was remembered by Colonel Blythe, and the *Burlington Castle* seemed the fittest place to receive the poor girl.

Good Captain Faulks had been taken into the secret.

“ Poor child ! ” he had said. “ I will watch over her for dear Stanny’s sake. I was fond of that lad, and she shall be like a daughter to me.”

At first she seemed quite dazed and stupefied by her grief. She gave up her lover as utterly lost, and would not listen to the consolation and encouragement offered.

“ He’ll turn up, my dear,” said Captain Faulks ;

“you’ll see. He was not saved from drowning to die by a Russian rope. Wait ; he’ll weather the storm.”

Mariquita would shake her head hopelessly and go about her appointed task with an unflagging but despairing diligence that was touching to see.

Uncle Barto, as he always wished her to call him, was the first to tell her the good news.

“He’s found, my dear. What did I tell you ? They couldn’t keep him ; I knew that.”

“The Holy Virgin be praised !” cried Mariquita. “But is he well — uninjured ? When shall we see him ?”

“Soon, my dear, soon. He will be brought—I mean he will come on board in a few days now.”

A simple pressure of the hand, a half-whispered exclamation of joy in her own fluent Spanish, was the only greeting that Mariquita gave her wounded lover when they lifted him on to the deck of the hospital-ship. But the vivid blush that mantled in her cheek, and the glad light that came into her splendid eyes, showed how much she had suffered, and how great was her emotion at this moment of trial.

As for Stanislas, he was nearly speechless with surprise.

“You here, Mariquita ! What strange adventure is this ? Tell me at once ——”

“No, no,” interposed the doctor ; “it is a long story. You are tired now, and will have plenty of time to hear from Miss Hidalgo all about herself.”

It was the telling of this story as she sat by the side of his couch, hand locked in hand, and he learnt by degrees the full measure of her self-sacrificing devotion, that did McKay so much good. It braced and strengthened him, giving him a new and stronger desire to live and enjoy the unspeakable blessing of this true woman's love.

They would have been altogether happy, these long days of convalescence, but for his enforced absence from his duties, and the distressing news that came from the front.

Lord Raglan had never recovered from the disappointment of the 18th of June. The failure of the attack, and the loss of many personal friends, preyed upon his spirits, and he suddenly became seriously ill. He never rallied, sank rapidly, and died in a couple of days, to the great grief of the whole army.

No one felt it more than McKay, to whom the sad news was broken by his old chief.

"It is very painful to think," said Sir Richard Airey, "that he passed away at the moment of failure; that he was not spared to see the fortress fall—for it must fall."

"Of course it must, sir," said McKay. "This last attack ought to have succeeded. The Russians were in sore straits."

"It was the French who spoiled everything by their premature advance. I knew we could do nothing until they had taken the Malakoff. That is the key of the position."

“You are right, sir. I myself heard Todleben say those very words.”

“Did you? That is important intelligence. It must not be forgotten when the time comes to organise a fresh attack.”

“I shall be well then, I hope, sir, and able to go in with the first column. I think I could show the way.”

“At any rate you can say more than most of us, for you have been actually inside the place.”

“And shall be again, if you will only wait another month!” cried McKay.

But the doctors laughed at him when he talked like this.

“You will not be able to put your foot to the ground for three months or more, and then you must make up your mind to crutches for another six.”

“I shall not see the next attack, then?”

“No; but you will see England before many weeks are gone. We are going to send you home at once.”

“But I had much rather not go——” began McKay.

“It’s no use talking; everything is settled.”

And so it came to pass. The good ship *Burlington Castle*, Bartholomew Faulks, master, having filled up its complement of invalids and wounded men, including Captain Stanislas McKay, steamed westward about the middle of July.

CHAPTER XII.

IN LINCOLN'S INN.

LEDANTEC, *alias* Hobson, had at once reported progress to Mrs. Wilders. The day after his arrival in Paris she had heard from him. He wrote—

“Have no fears. The police are on his track. They have his exact description, and are watching at the Mairie. Directly he shows himself he will be arrested as Rupert Gascoigne, tried, condemned. They do these things well in France. You will never hear of him again.”

There was much to quiet and console her in these words. After the dreadful surprise of Rupert's reappearance she had been a prey to the keenest anxiety. The whole edifice, built up with such patient, unscrupulous effort, had threatened to crumble away.

Bitter disappointment seemed inevitable just when her highest hopes were nearest fulfilment.

But now, thanks to her unscrupulous confederate, the staunch friend who had stood by her so often before, the last and worst difficulty was removed, and everything would be well.

Another day passed without further intelligence from Paris, but Ledantec's silence aroused no fresh apprehensions. Doubtless there was nothing special to tell; matters were progressing favourably, of course; until her husband was actually arrested, she could expect to hear nothing more.

On the evening of the third day, however—that, in fact, following Gascoigne's visit to the Mairie—she had a short letter from Lincoln's Inn. Lord Essendine's lawyers wrote her, begging she would call on them early next day, as they had an important communication to make to her. His lordship himself would be present, and their noble client had suggested, if that would suit her, an appointment for twelve noon.

“At last! They mean to do the right thing at last,” she said, exultingly. “The proud old man is humbled; he fears the extinction of his ancient line, and must make overtures now to me. My boy is the heir; they cannot resist his rights; his claim is undeniable. He shall be amply provided for; I shall insist on the most liberal terms.”

Fully satisfied of the cause of her summons to Lin-

coln's Inn, Mrs. Wilders presented herself punctually at twelve. Although she still schooled her face to sorrowful commiseration with the old peer whom fate had so sorely stricken, the elation she felt was manifest in her proud, arrogant carriage, and the triumphant glitter of her bold brown eyes.

Lord Essendine was with the senior partner, Mr. Burt, when she was shown in; and although he arose stiffly, but courteously, from his seat, did not take her outstretched hand, while his greeting was cold and formal in the extreme.

There was a long pause, and, as neither of the gentlemen spoke, Mrs. Wilders began.

“You sent for me, my lord ——”

His lordship waved his hand toward Mr. Burt, as though she must address herself to the old lawyer.

“Mrs. Wilders,” said Mr. Burt, gravely and with great deliberation—“Mrs. Wilders, if that indeed be your correct appellation ——”

And the doubt thus implied, reviving her worst fears, sent a cold shock to her heart.

But she was outwardly brave.

“How dare you!” she cried with indignant defiance in her tone. “Have you only brought me here to insult me? I appeal to your lordship. Is this the treatment I am to expect? I, your cousin's widow ——”

“One moment, madam,” interposed the lawyer. “To be a widow it is first necessary to have been a wife.”

“Do you presume to say I was not General Wilders's wife?” she asked hotly.

“Not his lawful wife. Stay, madam,” he said, seeing Mrs. Wilders half rise from her chair. “You must hear me out. We have evidence, the clearest seemingly; disprove it if you can.”

“What evidence?”

“The certificate of your other marriage. It is here.”

“How came you by it?” she inquired eagerly.

“No matter, it is all in proper form; you could not contest it, understand.”

“Well? I never pretended when I gave my hand to Colonel Wilders that I had not been married before. He was well aware of it.”

“But not that your first husband was alive at the time.”

“It is false! He was dead—drowned; he drowned himself in the Seine.”

“Your first husband is alive still, and you know it. You have seen him yourself within these last few days. He is ready to come forward at any time. It is he in fact who has furnished us with these proofs.”

“I shall protest, dispute, contest this to the uttermost. It is a base, discreditable plot against a weak, helpless, defenceless woman,” said Mrs. Wilders with effrontery; but despair was in her heart.

How Ledantec has deceived her!

“Is that all you have to say to me?” she went on at

length after another pause. "You, Lord Essendine—my husband's relative and friend, one of the richest and proudest men in this purse-proud land—how chivalrous, how brave of you, to bring me here to load me with vile aspersions, to rob me of my character; my child, my little friendless orphan boy, of the inheritance which is his by right of birth!"

"Do not let us get into recriminations, madam," said Lord Essendine, speaking for the first time. "It is to speak of your boy, mainly, that I wished for this interview."

"Poor child!"

"Whatever blot may stain his birth, I cannot forget that he has Wilders's blood in his veins. He is Cousin Bill's son still."

"You admit so much? Many thanks," she sneered.

"And since these heavy blows have struck us, blow after blow, he is the sole survivor of the house. I am willing—nay, anxious—to recognise him."

"Indeed! How truly generous of you!" There was no telling whether the speech was genuine, or another sneer.

"He cannot bear the title, but I can make him my heir. He may succeed to the position in due course—I hardly care how soon."

"Are you mocking me, Lord Essendine?"

"I am in sober earnest. I will do what I say, but only on one condition."

“And that is?”

“That you give up the child, absolutely, and forever.”

“What! part with the only thing left me to love and cherish ——”

“One moment, madam,” interposed the lawyers “before your emotion overpowers you. We happen to be able to judge of the extent of your affection for your only son.”

“How so?”

“We know you care so little for him that for month, you never see the child. It was left in England when you went to the Crimea ——”

“With my husband. Besides, I could not have made a nursery of Lord Lydstone's yacht.”

“And since you settled in London you have sent it to a nurse in the country.”

“It was better for the child.”

“No doubt you know best. However, this discussion is unnecessary. Will you comply with his lordship's conditions, and part with the child?”

“Never!”

“Remember, the offer will not be renewed.”

“And what, pray, would become of me? You deprive me of everything—present joy in my offspring, his affection in coming years. I shall be alone, friendless—a beggar, perhaps.”

“As to that, you must trust to his lordship's generosity.”

“Little as you deserve it,” added Lord Essendine, meaningly.

She turned on him at once.

“Of what do you accuse me?”

“Of much that I forbear to repeat now. But I will spare you—I will leave you to your own conscience and ——”

“What else, pray?”

“The law. It may seize you yet, madam, and it has a tight grip.”

“I shall not remain here to be so grossly insulted. If you have anything more to say to me, my lord, you must write.”

“And you refuse to give up the child?”

“You had better put your proposals on paper, Lord Essendine. I may consider them in my child’s interests, although the separation would be almost too bitter to bear. I may add, however, that I will consent to nothing that does not include some settlement on myself ——”

“As to that,” said the lawyer, “his lordship declines to bind himself—is it not so, my lord?”

“Quite; I will make no promises. But she will not find me ungenerous if she will accept my terms.”

And so the interview ended. There was no further reference made to the unpleasant facts now brought to light by the letter and documents sent over by Hyde. Mrs. Wilders, as we shall still call her, knew that she

could not dispute them; that any protest in the shape of law proceedings would only make more public her own shame and discomfiture. But if she was beaten she would not confess it yet; and at least she was resolved that the enemy who had so ruthlessly betrayed her should not enjoy his triumph.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

MRS. WILDERS'S first and only idea after she left Lincoln's Inn was to get to Paris as soon as she could. She no longer counted on much assistance from Ledantec, nor, indeed, had she much belief in him now; but she yet hoped he might help her to obtain revenge. Whatever it cost her, Rupert Gascoigne must pay the penalty of thwarting her when she seemed on the very threshold of success.

Having desired her maid to pack a few things, she hastily realised all the money she had at command and started by the night-mail for Paris.

Paris! Like the husband she had wronged and deserted, she had not visited the gay city for years. Not since she had thrown in her lot with an unspeak-

able villain, joining and abetting him in a vile plot against the man to whom she was bound by the strongest ties in life—by loyalty, affection, honour, truth.

“I hate going back there,” she told herself, as the Calais express whirled her through Abbeville, Amiens, Creil. “Hate it, dread it, more than I can say.”

And this repugnance might be interpreted into some glimmering remnant of good feeling were it not due to vague fears of impending evil rather than to shame and remorse.

She was landed at an early hour at the hotel she resolved to patronise: a quiet, old-fashioned house in the best part of the Rue de Rivoli, overlooking the gardens of the Tuileries.

She was shown to a room, and proceeded at once to correct the ravages of the night journey. A handsome woman still, but vain, like all her sex, and anxious to look her best on every occasion.

Hastily swallowing a cup of coffee, as soon as her toilette was completed she issued forth and took the first cab she could find.

“To the Porte St. Martin,” she said; “lose no time.”

Arrived there, she alighted, dismissed the cab, and proceeded on foot to the Faubourg St. Martin, to the house we have visited already, and in which our friend Hyde was still a prisoner.

Simply mentioning her name, she passed by the porter with the air of one who knew her road, although it was probably the first time she had come there. On

the sixth floor she knocked as Hyde had done, and was admitted much as he had been.

There was no disguise about her, however, and she sent in her name as "Mrs. Wilders, just arrived from England, and most anxious to see Mr. Hobson."

"You, Cyprienne!" said the man we know, who answered to the names of both Hobson and Ledantec. "In Paris! This was quite unnecessary. I am arranging everything. You had my letter?"

"Pshaw! Hippolyte, you can't befool me."

"Why this tone? I tell you I have done everything."

"You may think so, but in the meantime Rupert has stolen a march on me. He has got the papers——"

"Impossible!"

"It is so. Got them, and placed them, with a full statement, in Lord Essendine's hands."

"How do you know this?"

"From Lord Essendine's own lips?"

"How can he have done this? He—a prisoner."

"Are you sure of that?"

"He is fast by the leg. Come and see him. He is in the next room."

"Here? In our power?"

"Yes: let us go and see him at once."

There was a fierce gleam in her eyes, as though she wished to stab him, wherever she found him, to the heart.

Hyde was where we had left him, still bound hand and foot to the bedstead. He had spent a miserable

night, he was stiff and sore from his strange position, and they had given him little or no food. But his manner was defiant, and his air exulting, as he saw Ledantec and Cyprienne approach.

“Have you come to release me? It’s about time. You will gain nothing by keeping me here.”

“Dog! I hate you!” cried Mrs. Wilders, as she struck him a cruel, cowardly blow on the face.

“A pleasant greeting from the woman I made my wife.”

“Would that fate had never thrown us together; that I had never heard your name!”

“No one can wish it more sincerely than myself,” replied Gascoigne. “It was you who wrecked and ruined my life.”

“And what have you done to me, Rupert Gascoigne? Could you not leave me in peace? Why follow me to persecute me, to rob me and my son ——”

“Of the proceeds of your infamy?” interrupted Gascoigne, or Hyde, as I prefer to call him; “I will tell you. Because you dared to plot against a man I esteem. Whatever has happened to Stanislas McKay, he owes it, I feel confident, to you. I may never see him again ——”

“You never will, and for a double reason. Do not hope, Rupert Gascoigne, to leave this place again.”

And she looked capable of taking his life then and there.

“Come, come! Cyprienne; you are going too far. Mr. Gascoigne has not behaved very well, perhaps, but

it is not for us to call him to account. We will leave him to the myrmidons of the law. He is wanted, we know, by the police."

"Am I?" said Hyde, mockingly; "so are others, as you will find. At this moment the house is surrounded. The authorities have long had their eye on Hippolyte Ledantec, *alias* Hobson, the Russian spy."

The confederates looked at each other uneasily, and Ledantec said—

"It can hardly be so. But it will be well to ascertain and take precautions. Come! there is a way out of this house known only to me."

And, so saying, he went towards the door, followed by Mrs. Wilders. Suddenly he paused, surprised by a loud knocking outside.

They heard the old woman's voice angrily asking who was there; they heard the reply, spoken loudly and authoritatively.

"The police! Open, in the name of the law. Open! or we shall break the door down."

Next minute the apartment was invaded by a *posse* of police, all of whom were drawn to where Hyde was by his loud cries of "Here! Here!"

"Let no one move," said the chief of the police, briefly "What is the meaning of this? Who are you?" This was to Ledantec.

"My name is Mr. Hobson, a British subject, and member of the press. I shall require you to explain this intrusion."

“His real name is Ledantec!” cried Hyde, interposing. “Ex-gambler, and now spy in the pay of the Russians. This woman is his accomplice.”

“And who may you be?” said the police-officer, turning to Hyde.

“I know this gentleman,” put in the *attaché* whom Hyde had seen at the Embassy. “He is a British officer—Mr. Hyde.”

“I know better!” cried Ledantec, with a scornful laugh. “I denounce him as Rupert Gascoigne, the perpetrator of the murder in Tinplate Street, fifteen years ago. The case cannot yet be forgotten at the Prefecture.”

“Is it possible?” said the chief of the police, looking curiously at Hyde. “Surely I should recognise you. I was one of those from whom you escaped by jumping into the Seine.”

“I do not deny that I am the man,” replied Hyde, calmly. “But I am innocent, and only ask a fair trial.”

“We must arrest you, anyway. Keep what you have to say for the judge. Come! bring them along; it’s altogether a fine morning’s work.”

And within an hour Hyde found himself in his old quarters—a separate cell of the *depôt* of the Prefecture. The other prisoners were lodged there also, but apart from him and each other.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SCALES REMOVED.

THE capture made by the police in the Faubourg St. Martin was kept secret. Under the Second Empire nothing was published except with the permission of the authorities, and they had their reasons for not talking too openly of Hyde's arrest. He was a British subject, a military officer moreover, and these were claims to the consideration of French justice that would not have been so readily recognised fifteen years before.

It was, of course, inevitable that the affair of Tinplate Street should be re-opened. But a new complexion was given to it by the recent arrests. Hyde had been interrogated at once by the magistrate who had examined him before; the same man, but so different;

no longer insolently positive and threatening unjustly, but bland, considerate, obliging. The fact was he had had a hint from his superiors to treat the Englishman gently.

"The truth must come out now," Hyde had said, when asked if he remembered the circumstances of his former arrest. "You have the real culprit in custody."

"This Ledantec, I suppose?" asked the judge.

"It was he who struck the blow; I saw him with my own eyes, as I told you years ago. Then he escaped by the window into a back-street; I followed him, but he was too quick for me. A cab waited for him, picked him up, and he was driven away."

While Hyde was speaking the judge had turned over the pages of a voluminous document in front of him,—a detailed report of the previous interrogation.

"Your story does not vary. You have either an excellent memory, or ——" and the stern magistrate smiled quite archly—"or you are really telling me the truth."

"The truth! I can swear to it."

"What is more, your story is in the main corroborated. Shortly after your escape we laid hands on the very cabman who had helped Ledantec away. He described the scene as you have, and through him we got upon the trace of his fare—Ledantec, as you call him."

"But you never arrested him?"

"Until now he carefully kept away from Paris."

“But you have him now on a double charge.”

“Him and his accomplice. Justice will be satisfied, never fear.”

“How long will you keep me here?”

“I regret that for the present it will be impossible to release you. We are compelled first to verify the facts before us. But in a few days at the latest I hope your trouble will be at an end. You have powerful friends, Monsieur.”

“The British Embassy, I suppose?” said Hyde, complacently.

“Yes; and his Imperial Majesty has deigned to go personally into your case.”

“Then I can wait events calmly and without fear.”

Presently, when Hyde had been removed, Ledantec was introduced, and was received with the brutal harshness which was the judge's habitual manner towards prisoners.

“Your name, profession, address?” he asked abruptly.

“Silas Hobson, an English journalist, residing in Duke Street, St. James's, London.”

“It is false! You have no right to the name of Hobson. You are not an Englishman. You may reside in London, but it is only temporarily.”

“Who am I then?” asked Ledantec with a sneer.

“In Paris, at your last visit, you passed as Hippolyte Ledantec, but your real name is Serge Michaelovitch Vasilenikoff. You are a Russian by birth, by profession a gambler, a blackleg, a cheat.”

Ledantec, as I shall still call him, merely shrugged his shoulders in sarcastic helplessness at this abuse.

“ You are worse. You are a spy in the service of the enemies of the State ; an unconvicted murderer —— ”

He bent his eyes upon the prisoner with a piercing gaze, to watch the effect of this accusation.

Ledantec never blenched, and the judge presently continued ——

“ You are the real author of the crime in Tinsplate Street.”

“ M. Rupert Gascoigne is your informant, I presume,” said Ledantec sneering ; “ it is easy to rebut a charge by throwing it on another. But you are too clever, M. le Juge, to be imposed upon.”

“ You at least cannot hoodwink me. We have the fullest evidence, let me tell you, of the crime—all the crimes—laid to your charge. Your accomplice has confessed.”

This was said to try the prisoner, and it succeeded, for he started slightly at the word “ crimes.”

“ Accomplice ! Of whom do you speak ? ”

“ There is a woman in custody who has been associated with you for years. It was she who instigated you to the robbery and murder of the Baron d'Enot. She joined you when you fled from the gambling-den in Tinsplate Street, and shared your flight from Paris. She was with you in St. Petersburg till you separated after a violent quarrel —— ”

“ The blame was hers,” interrupted Ledantec.

“Possibly, but you were equally to blame. In any case she left you to shift for herself. She entered a great English family by a false marriage, and, when next you met her, conspired with her to bring the wealth of that family within her grasp. You again became her guilty partner, and plotted to take the life of the heir to a noble English title and great estates.”

He was referring now to McKay, but Ledantec, misled by a guilty conscience, was thinking of Lord Lydstone, and his mysteriously sudden death.

“That was her doing !” he cried remorsefully. “In removing Lord Lydstone ——”

The judge caught quickly at the new name.

“You removed, or, more plainly, you murdered Lord Lydstone at the instigation of your accomplice—is that so ?”

Ledantec would not confess to this, but the judge felt certain that he had come upon the track of another dreadful crime.

“There is enough against you,” he went on slowly, “to convict you a dozen times over, enough to send you to the guillotine. Your only hope will be to make a clean breast of everything. By helping us to convict your accomplice you may save your forfeited life.”

“But I shall be sent to the galleys; to Toulon or Brest. Life as a French galley-slave is worse than death.”

“You will not think so when the alternative is put before you,” said the judge, dryly; “and my advice to you is to make a full confession.”

Ledantec shook his head, but it was with far less assurance than he had shown at the beginning of his examination. It was clear that he saw himself fast in the toils ; that the law held him tight in its clutch ; that unqualified submission was the only course to pursue.

He had spoken fully and unreservedly, confessing freely to every guilty deed in his long career of wickedness, possessing the judge with every detail of his own and his accomplice's crimes, when that accomplice was brought up for interrogation in her turn.

She was ghastly pale : the rough ordeal of imprisonment had robbed her dress and demeanour of all its coquetry ; but she faced the magistrate with self-possessed, insolent effrontery, and met his stern look with cold, unflinching eyes.

"Why am I brought here?" she began, fiercely. "How dare you detain me? You and your masters shall answer for this ill-usage. I am an English lady, belonging to one of the proudest families in the country. The British Embassy, the British nation, will call you to the strictest account."

"Ta ! ta ! ta !" said the judge, with a gesture of the hand essentially French ; "I think you are slightly mistaken ; you are no more English than I am. I know you, and all about you, Cyprienne Vergette—otherwise Gascoigne, otherwise Wilders.

"Shall I tell you a little of your early history? How you eloped from Gibraltar, where your father was Vice-

Consul ; how you came to Paris with your lover ; your marriage, your life, your desertion of your husband, your association with Ledantec, your second marriage, your plots against Milord Essendine and his family, your murder ——”

“It is a lie!” she interrupted him, hastily. “I never committed murder.”

“You compassed Lord Lydstone’s death, although you did not strike the blow. You would have caused the death of another English officer, but, happily, he has escaped your murderous intrigues.”

Only that morning the French journals had copied from the English an account of McKay’s almost providential escape on the 18th of June.

“But your last attempt has failed utterly. Mr. ——” he referred to his papers for the name—“McKay is safe within the British lines. The agent you employed to inveigle him into danger is dead, but with his last breath he confessed that he had had his orders from you. Now, Cyprienne Vergette, what have you to say?”

“I deny everything. I protest against your jurisdiction.”

“The Assize Court will hear, but scarcely admit, your plea. That tribunal and its president will deal you as you deserve.”

CHAPTER XV.

L'ENVOI.

THE *Burlington Castle* made a short halt at Constantinople, and another, somewhat longer, at Malta ; a third was to be made at Gibraltar, where two of our most important characters proposed to leave the ship.

The delay at Malta was to allow Miss Hidalgo to make her appearance in the Supreme Court as principal witness against the baker, Giuseppe Pisani, commonly called Valetta Joe.

The British military authorities in the Crimea had hesitated to deal summarily with the spy's offence. He might have been hanged out of hand under the Mutiny Act; but such swift retribution, however richly merited, was obnoxious to our general's sense of justice.

He preferred to leave the criminal to the ordinary

tribunals of his native island. It could adjudge and carry out any punishment short of death, if so inclined. In the Crimea the capital sentence only would have been possible.

The trial was short and summary. Mariquita, dressed still in the sober, quaker-like garb of a hospital-nurse, said what she had to say in a few simple words. Her sweet face and artless manner were the admiration of the whole court, and there was a little round of applause as it came out that she had ventured so far and braved so much out of love for the gallant soldier who was leaning on his crutches close by her side.

Valetta Joe was found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment for four years, and with his conviction the reader's interest in him will probably cease. It disposed of the last of McKay's active enemies; Benito, as we have seen, had died in Balaclava hospital, and Cyprienne Vergette and her accomplice were in the grip of the French law.

The enemies had disappeared; friends only remained. When he landed at Gibraltar numbers came to greet him, from the Governor himself to the Tio Pedro and the old crone his wife. Letters had already assured them of Mariquita's safety, and they wept crocodile tears of joy as they clasped her once more in their arms.

They were her only relatives, and as such McKay was compelled to surrender his love to them for a time. But only for the very briefest time. He measured

their affections at its true value, and had no compunction in asserting his claim over theirs to protect and cherish her.

He easily persuaded them and Mariquita, but with some tender insistence, to hurry on the marriage, and it took place within a few short weeks of their return to the Rock. Why should he wait? He was his own master; the only relative whose consent and approval he coveted—his mother—had already promised gladly to accept the girl of his choice.

His great relatives, the Essendines, might question the propriety of the match, anxious that he should look higher, and find his future bride amongst the aristocracy to which he now rightly belonged.

That was a point on which he meant to please himself, and did.

When, after a short honeymoon at Granada, the young married couple returned to Gibraltar and travelled leisurely homewards, Lord Essendine was one of the first to welcome him on arrival, and to congratulate him on the beauty of his bride.

By-and-by, when the days of mourning were ended, Lady Essendine came out of her strict retirement to present Mrs. McKay at Court; and the handsome Spanish girl with the strange romantic history was one of the greatest successes of the next London season. Ere long the future succession of the Essendine title was assured beyond doubt. McKay was blessed with

a numerous family — many sons came to satisfy the head of the house that the title of Essendine and the family name were in no danger of extinction. But Lord Essendine lived for many years after the termination of the Crimean war, and McKay was a general officer and a Knight of the Bath before he became the fifteenth Earl of Essendine.

Having thus disposed of the hero whose early career was so chequered and eventful, I must add a word as to the fate of the other actors in this veracious narrative.

First as to Hyde, who continued to be known by that name to his death, preferring it greatly to the other, with its painful memories. He remained a prisoner in the dépôt of the Prefecture only a few days. The confession made by Ledantec and the evidence of other witnesses so amply attested the innocence of the M. Gascoigne accused of the Tinplate Street murder that his release followed as a matter of course. Hyde waited in Paris to hear the issue of the trial of the real offenders, and, painful as it was to be present at the sentence of the woman who had once borne his name, he yet listened without flinching to the whole story. After all, there was a certain relief in knowing that he was well rid of her. It was little likely that the Central prison to which she was consigned in perpetual "reclusion" would ever surrender its prey.

He heard, too, with lively satisfaction, the sentence

of his old foe, Ledantec, to hard labour at the galleys for twenty years.

With these trials, and the penalties that followed them, he turned down for ever the dark page of his life, and presently returned to England, where he spent the remainder of his leave with his old friend and comrade, McKay.

After that had expired he returned to the Crimea, and was present at the closing scenes of the war. He continued to serve with the Royal Picts for many years more—the regiment had become his home—and, as he was in due course promoted to the post of paymaster, his position and income were materially changed.

He lived to a green old age, retiring from the service full of rank and honour. Colonel Hyde was long a notable figure at his club in Pall Mall, which gained a new and very popular *chef* when Anatole Belhomme wrote him that he had been summarily dismissed from the French police. Hyde spent a great portion of every year at Essendine Castle, after his friend had succeeded to the estates, and there was no more honoured guest than he at the coming of age of Rupert, Viscount Lydstone, his godson.

The boy whom Mrs. Wilders had hesitated to surrender to old Lord Essendine, from greed rather than maternal instinct, was not neglected by the old peer. After the mother had passed out of sight, the son was brought up decently, given a good education, and

eventually started in life. He adopted the military profession, and was not denied the support and encouragement of Stanislas McKay.

Our hero was able to help his uncle, too, the much-aggrieved functionary of the Military Munition Department, and secured for him the decoration he had so long coveted in vain.

Uncle Barto, the worthy captain of the *Burlington Castle*, made a snug fortune by his commercial ventures during the war, and paid regular visits to his nephew, Stanny. Mrs. McKay, or Countess of Essendine as she became, could never forget what she owed for his generous hospitality on board the *Burlington*.

THE END.

BLUE BLOOD.

BLUE BLOOD.

CHAPTER I.

“THE idea is simply preposterous. I decline to entertain it. I cannot listen to it—not for one moment. Never!”

The speaker was Mrs. Purling, “heiress of the Purlings”; imperious, emphatic, self-opinionated, as women become who have had their own way all their lives through.

“But, mother,” went on Harold, her only son—like herself, large and broadly built; but, unlike her, quiet and rather submissive in manner, as one who had been habitually kept under—“I am really in earnest. I am absolutely sick of doing nothing.”

“Because you won’t do what you might. There is plenty for you to do. Has not the Duchess asked you to Scotland? You refuse—and such a splendid invitation! I have offered you a yacht. I say you may share a river in Norway with dear Lord Faro. I implore you to drive a coach, to keep racehorses, to take your place in the best society, as the representative of the Purling ——”

“Pills?” put in Harold, with a queer smile.

His mother’s face grew black instantly.

“Harold, do not dare to speak in that way. My father’s memory should be respected by my only son.”

Old Purling had made all his money by a certain chemical compound which had been adopted by the world at large as a panacea for every ill. But the heiress of the Purlings hated any reference to the Primeval Pills, although she owed to them her wealth.

“I want a profession,” Harold said, returning to his point. “I want regular employment.”

“Well, I say go into the Guards.”

“I am too old. Besides, peace-soldiering, and in London, would never suit me, I know.”

“Read law; it is a gentlemanly occupation.”

“But most uninteresting. Now medicine ——”

“Do not let me hear the word; the mere idea is

intolerable. My son, the heir of the Purlings must not condescend so low."

"Considering my own father was a doctor," cried Harold, rather hotly.

"Not a mere doctor. A man of science, of world-wide repute, is not like a general practitioner, with a red lamp and an apothecary's shop, where he makes up ——"

"Pills?" said Harold, again. He was throwing down the gauntlet indeed. Mrs. Purling had never known him like this before.

"Leave the room, Harold. I decline to speak to you further, or again, unless you appear in a more obedient and decorous frame of mind."

That Mrs. Purling was what she was, the chances of her life and her father were principally to blame. He had begun life as an errand-boy, and ended it as a millionaire; but long before he ended he had forgotten the beginning. He had a sort of notion that he belonged to one of the old families in the county wherein he had bought wide estates, and he himself styled his only daughter "the heiress of the Purlings," as if there had been Purlings back for generations, and he was the last, not the first, of his race. It was he who had indoctrinated her with ideas of her own im-

portance ; and these same views had taken so strong a hold of him that he found it quite impossible to mate his daughter according to his mind. He was ambitious, as was natural to a *nouveau riche* ; wide awake, or he would not have made so much money. Not one of the crowds of suitors who came forward was exactly to his taste. He would have preferred a man of title, but the peers who were not penniless were too proud ; and the best baronet was an aged bankrupt, who had been twice through the courts, and enjoyed an indifferent name. It was strange that Isabel did not cut the Gordian knot, and choose for herself ; but she was a dutiful daughter, and little less cautious than her father. In the midst of it all he was called away on some particular business of his own—to another world—and Isabel was left alone, past thirty, and unmarried still.

The *rôle* of single blessedness may be charming to a man of means, but it is often extremely irksome to an heiress in her own right. Miss Purling was like a pigeon that escapes from the inclosure at a match—an aim for every gun around. Great ladies took her up, as a kindness to their younger sons ; briefless barristers, with visions of the Woolsack, besought her to help them to the first step—a seat in the House ; clergymen with

great views prayed her to join them in some stupendous charitable work, that must win for them the lawn-sleeves; more than one impecunious soldier pleaded with her for their tailors, whose bills without her help they were quite unable to pay. She seemed a common prey, fair game for every hand. This developed in her an undue amount of suspicion and a certain hardness of heart. She began to doubt whether there was one disinterested man in the whole world.

But before many years had passed she realised that unless she married there could be no prospect of peace. Already she had quarrelled with a dozen companions of her own sex; she wished now to try one of the other. But men seemed tired of proposing to her. She had the character of being as hard and cold as iron; and no one cared to run his head against a wall. If she wanted a husband now the proposal must come from her. Miss Purling in her heart rather liked the notion; it gave her a chance of posing like a queen in search of a consort, and years of independence had made her very queenlike and despotic indeed. So much so, that the only man to suit her must be a mere cipher without a will of his own; and he was difficult to find. Men of the kind are not plentiful unless they plainly perceive substantial advantage from assuming

the part. But few guessed what kind of man would exactly suit Isabel Purling, so there were few pretenders.

Among those who flocked to her *soirées*—she was fond of entertaining in spite of her disabilities as a single woman—was a meek little professor, who lodged in Camden Town, and who came afoot in roomy goloshes, which now and again, in a fit of abstraction, he carried upstairs and laid upon the tea-table or at his hostess's feet, as though the carpet was damp and he feared she might run the risk of catarrh. He was reputed to be extremely erudite, a ripe scholar, and of some fame in scientific research. But of all his discoveries—and he had made many under the microscope and in space—the most surprising was the discovery that a lady who owned a deer-park and many thousands a-year desired him to make her his wife. But he was an obliging little man, always ready to do a kind thing for anybody; and he obliged Miss Purling in the way she wished—after all, at some cost to himself. The marriage meant little less than self-effacement for him; he was to take his wife's name instead of giving her his; he was to forego his favourite pursuits, and from an independent man of science pass into a mere appendage to the Purling property—part

and parcel of his wife's goods and chattels as much as the park-palings, or her last-purchased dinner-service of rare old "blue."

It was odd that Miss Purling's choice should have fallen where it did ; for her tendencies were decidedly upward, and she would have dearly loved to be styled "my lady," and to have moved freely in the society of the "blue-blooded of the land." It was her distrustfulness which had stood in the way. She feared that in an aristocratic alliance she could not have made her own terms. And with the results of this marriage with Dr. Purling—as he was henceforth styled—she had every reason to be pleased. He proved a most exemplary husband—the chief of her subjects, nothing more ; a loyal, unpretending vassal, who did not ask to share the purple, but was content to sit upon the steps of the throne. He continued a shy, reserved, unobtrusive little man to the end of the chapter ; and the chapter was closed without unnecessary delay as soon as the birth of a son secured the succession of the Purling estates. Dr. Purling felt there was nothing more required of him, so he quietly died.

His widow raised a tremendous tablet to his memory, eulogising his scientific attainments and domestic worth ; but, although she appeared inconsolable, she

was secretly pleased to have the uncontrolled education of her infant son. An elderly lady with a baby-boy is like a girl with a doll—just as the little mother dresses and undresses its counterfeit presentment of a child in wax and rags, crooning over its tiny cradle, talking to it in baby-language, pretending to watch with anxious solicitude its every mood, so Mrs. Purling found in Harold a plaything of which she never tired. She coddled and cosseted him to her heart's content. If he had cried for the moon some effort would have been made to obtain for him the loan of that pale planet, or the best substitute for it that could be got for cash. If his finger ached, or he had a pain in his big toe, he was physicked with half the *Pharmacopœia*; he underwent divers systems of regimen, was kept out of draughts, cautioned against chills, cased in red flannel; he might, to crown all, have been laid by in cotton-wool. His mother's over-much care ought to have killed him; but he had inherited from her a fine physique, and the lad was large-limbed, healthy, and well grown.

And this vigilant supervision was prolonged far beyond the time when youths are emancipated usually from their mother's control. Long after he had left college, and was launched out upon the world, she

kept her hands upon the reins, ruling him with a sharp bit, and driving him the road she decided it was best for him to go. Mrs. Purling had grown more and more imperious with advancing years, impatient of contradiction, self-satisfied, very positive that everything she did was right. She could not brook opposition to her wishes. Those who dared to thwart her must do it at their peril; no nature but one entirely subservient would be likely to continue permanently in accord with hers; and it was easy to predict troubles in the future between mother and son unless he yielded always a complete and docile submission to her will.

For a long time Harold wore his chains without a murmur. Obedient deference had been a habit with him from childhood, and, however irksome and galling the slavery, it was not until he had made practical acquaintance with the actual value of the life she wished him to lead that there arose in him a disposition to rebel. Mrs. Purling had all along been chafed with the notion that she did not enjoy that social distinction to which as a wealthy woman she considered herself entitled. In her own estimation she ranked very high; but the best families of the neighbourhood did not accept her valuation. Some went so far as to call her a vulgar old snob; and "snobbish," as we understand

the word, she certainly was. She worshipped rank; and it was a very sore point with her that she was not freely admitted into the best society of the county in which she lived. She looked to Harold to redress her wrongs. Where she failed, a handsome young fellow, of engaging presence and heir to a fine estate, must assuredly succeed. He might, if he chose, be acceptable anywhere. There was no limit to her dreams. He might mate with a duke's daughter; and after such an alliance—who would presume to question the social rights of the Purlings?

It was therefore her chief and greatest desire to make a man of fashion of her son. Her purse was long—he might dip into it as deep as he pleased. Let him but take his proper position, on an equality with the noblest and best, and all charges would be gladly defrayed by her. She wanted him to be a dandy, *répandu* in society, a member of the Coaching Club, well known at Prince's, at Hurlingham, at Lord's; sought after by dowagers; intimate with royalties; she would not have seriously resented a reputation for a little wickedness, provided he erred in the right direction—with people of the blue blood, that is to say—and the scandal did not go too far.

Unhappily, Harold's tastes and inclinations lay all in

the opposite direction. In external appearance he favoured his mother, in disposition he was his father's son. Like him reserved—he would have been shy but for his training at school and college, which had rubbed the sensitive skin off his self-consciousness; like him studious too, thoughtful, quiet, with scientific tastes and proclivities. His friends in familiar talk called him “Old Steady”; he had never got into debt or serious trouble. Even in the midst of the whirling maze of London life he continued steadfastly sober and sedate.

Here at once was to be found the germ of discord between mother and son, the first gap or chink in their friendly relations, which might widen some day into a yawning breach. But yet Mrs. Purling could find no fault with her son. She might resent the staid sober-mindedness of his conduct; but she was perforce compelled to confess that he was a dear good son, affectionate, devoted, considerate; and there was much solid comfort in the thought that the good name of the Purlings, as well as their substantial wealth, could be safely intrusted to his hands. This she readily allowed; and, had he continued obedient and tractable until he was grey-haired, Mrs. Purling might have gone down into her grave without a shadow of excuse for quarreling with her son.

It was when he was past five-and-twenty that there arose between them misunderstanding, at first only a small cloud no bigger than a man's hand. Harold suddenly declared that he was sick of gallivanting about the fashionable world; sick of idleness—sick of the silly purposeless existence he led; and thereupon announced his intention of studying medicine seriously and as a profession. Mrs. Purling was at first aghast, then argumentative, finally indignant. But Harold remained inflexible, and she grew more and more wrathful. It led at length to something like a rupture between them. She received the news of his success in the schools with grim contempt, condescending only to ask once whether he wished her to buy him a practice, or whether he meant to put up a red lamp at the family-mansion in Berkeley Square.

Her persistent implacability gave Harold much pain, but he did not despair of bringing her round in the end; only, to avoid further dissensions, he wisely resolved to keep out of her way: and as soon as he had gained his diploma he started for Germany, intending to prosecute his studies abroad.

CHAPTER II.

It was not until he had been absent more than a year that Mrs. Purling appeared to relent. She began to yearn after her son ; she missed him and was disposed to be reconciled, provided he would but meet her half-way. At first she sent olive-branches in the shape of munificent letters of credit over and above his liberal allowance ; then came more distinct overtures in lengthy epistles, which grew daily warmer in tone and plainly showed that her resentment was passing rapidly away. These letters of hers were her chief pleasure in life ; she prided herself on her ability to wield the pen. When, instead of a few curt sentences in brief acknowledgment of his letters, his mother resumed her old custom of filling several sheets of post with advice,

gossip, odds and ends of news, mixed with stray scraps of wisdom culled from Martin Tupper, Harold began to hope that the worst was over and that he would soon be forgiven in set form.

And he was right. Pardon was soon extended to him, not quite unconditional, but weighted merely with terms which—Mrs. Purling thought—no sensible man could hesitate to accept.

She only asked him to settle in life. He must marry some day—why not soon? Not to anybody, of course,—he must be on his guard against foreign intriguing sirens, who would entangle him if they could,—but to some lady of rank and fashion, fitted by birth and breeding to be the mother of generations of Purlings yet to be. This was the condition she annexed to forgiveness of the past; this the text upon which she preached in her letters week after week. The doctrine of judicious marriage appeared in all she wrote with the unfailing regularity of the red thread that runs through all the strands of Admiralty rope.

Harold smiled at the reiteration of these sentiments; smiled, but he had misgivings. Herein might be another source of disagreement between his mother and himself. Would their respective opinions agree as to the style of girl most likely to suit him? Then he

began to consider what style of girl his mother would choose; and while he was thus musing there came a missive which plainly showed Mrs. Purling's hand.

"I have been at Compton Revel for a week ——"

"I wonder," thought Harold, when he had read thus far, "why they asked her there? My dear old mother must have been in the seventh heaven of delight. She always longed to be on more intimate terms with Lady Calverly."

"I have been at Compton Revel for a week," his mother said, "and met there a Miss Fanshawe, one of Lord Fanshawe's daughters, who seemed to me quite the nicest girl I have ever known. I took to her directly; and without conceit I may be permitted to say that I think she took quite as readily to me. We became immense friends. She was at such pains to be agreeable to an uninteresting old woman like myself that I feel convinced she has a good heart. I confess I was charmed with her. It is not only that she is strikingly handsome, but her whole bearing and her style are so distinguished that she might be descended from a long line of kings—as I make no doubt she is.

"Of course she has moved only in the best circles; her mother being dead, she has been introduced by the Countess of Gayfeather, and goes with her ladyship

everywhere. Just imagine, she has been to State-balls at the Palace; the Prince has danced with her, and she has been spoken to by the Princess! You know how I enjoy hearing all the news of the great world, and Miss Fanshawe has been so obliging as to amuse me for hours with descriptions of all she has seen and heard—not a little, I assure you; she is not one of those flighty girls who have no ears but for flattery, no eyes but for young men; she is observant, critical perhaps, but strikingly just in her strictures on what goes on around. I find she has thought out several of the complex problems of our modern high-pressure life; and really she gave me very valuable ideas upon my favourite theory of ‘lady-helps,’ to which I am devoting now so much of my spare time.

“Miss Fanshawe has promised to pay me a long visit at Purlington some day soon—a real act of kindness which I fully appreciate. It will indeed be a treat to a lonely old woman to find so entertaining a guest and companion.

“When do you think of returning? Gollop tells me there are plenty of pheasants this year. Surely, you have had enough of those dry German *savants* and that dull university-town?”

The hook was rather coarsely baited; it would

hardly have deceived the most guileless and unsuspecting. Harold Purling at a glance could read between the lines; he could trace effect to cause, and readily understood why his mother was so anxious for his return.

“One of Lady Gayfeather’s girls, is she? I never thought much of that lot. However—but why on earth should Lady Calverly take my dear mother up in this way, at the eleventh hour?”

He would have wondered yet more if he had seen how cordially Mrs. Purling had been welcomed to Compton Revel.

“It is so good of you to come to us,” Lady Calverly said, with effusion. “We are so glad to have you here, and have looked forward to it for so long.”

For about seventeen years, in fact, during which time Lord and Lady Calverly had completely ignored the existence of their near neighbour, Mrs. Purling. Compton Revel might have been a paradise, and the heiress an exiled *peri* waiting at the gates.

The party assembled was after Mrs. Purling’s own heart. They were all great people, at least in name; and the heiress of the Purlings was heard to murmur that she did like to be in such good society—she felt so perfectly at home. And they all made much of her.

One night she was handed in to dinner by a Duke, another by an ex-Cabinet Minister. The latter made her feel proud, for the first time in her life, of her son, and the line he had adopted so sorely against her will.

“Mr. Purling’s paper on toxicology,” he said, “is quite the cleverest thing that has appeared on the subject. My friend, Sir William ——,” he mentioned a physician of world-wide repute, “considers that Mr. Purling will go far.”

Lady Calverly followed suit by declaring that Mr. Purling was a pattern young man, every one gave him so good a character. They *did* hope to see him at Compton Revel directly he got back to England.

Then Miss Fanshawe metaphorically prostrated herself before Mrs. Purling, and by judicious phrases and ready sympathy completely won her good-will.

“You certainly made an impression upon her, Phillipa,” said Lady Calverly afterwards.

“She is a vain and rather silly old woman,” Miss Fanshawe replied. Language that might have opened Mrs. Purling’s eyes.

“But I am very glad you became such good friends. Purlington is a very desirable place.”

Here, then, was a faint clue to the mystery of Mrs. Purling’s tardy reception at Compton Revel. Intrigue

—not necessarily base, but covered by the harmless phrase, “It would be so very nice”—was at work to bring about a match between Miss Fanshawe and Harold Purling. She was one of a large family of girls and her father was an impoverished peer. Besides, her career so far had not been an unmixed success. Lady Gayfeather’s young ladies had the reputation of being the “quickest” in the town.

“I have met the son,” went on Lady Calverly.

“Yes?” Phillipa’s tone was one of absolute indifference.

“He is a gentleman.”

“I have always heard of him as a solemn prig—‘Old Steady’ he was named at college. I confess I have no special leaning to these very proper and decorous youths.”

“Do not say that you are harping still on that old affair. I assure you Gilly Jillingham is unworthy of you. You are not thinking still of each other, I sincerely hope?”

“I may be of him,” said Phillipa bitterly. “He is not likely to think of any one—but himself.”

“I shall never forgive myself for surrendering you to Lady Gayfeather. Nothing but misery seems to hang about her and her house. This last affair ——”

There had been a terrible scandal, not many months old, and hardly forgotten yet, which had roused Lady Calverly to remove her cousin, Phillipa Fanshawe, from the evil influences of Lady Gayfeather's set. Whether or not the rescue had come in time it would be difficult to say. Miss Fanshawe could hardly escape scot-free from her associations, nor was it to her advantage that rumour had bracketed her name with that of a successful but not popular man of fashion. There had been a talk of marriage, but he had next to nothing; no more had she.

"We must have an end to all that," said Lady Calverly decisively. "You must promise me to forget Mr. Jillingham for good and all."

"Of course," replied Phillipa; but the pale face and that sad look in her weary eyes belied her words.

It seemed as if she had shot her bolt at the target of life's happiness, and that the arrow had fallen very wide of the gold.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN old Purling bought the ——shire estates there was an ancient manor-house on the property, a picturesque but inconvenient residence, which did not at all come up to his ideas of a country gentleman's place. It was therefore incontinently pulled down, and one of the most fashionable architects of the day, having *carte blanche* to build, erected a Palladian pile of wide frontage and imposing dimensions on the most prominent site he could find. It ought to have haunted its author like a crime; but he was spared, and the punishment fell upon the innocent who dwelt around. There was no escape from Purlington, so long as you were within a dozen miles of it. Wherever you went and wherever you looked, down from points of vantage

or up from quiet dells, this great white caravanserai, with its glittering plate-glass panes and staring stucco, forced itself upon you with the unblushing effrontery of a brazen beauty, with painted face and bedizened in flaunting attire. But the heiress thought it was a very splendid place, with its pineries, conservatories, its acres of glass, and its army of retainers in liveries of rainbow hues. Mrs. Purling was a little afraid of her servants, albeit strong-minded in other respects; but it was natural she should submit to a coachman who had once worn the royal livery, or quail before a butler who had lived with a duke.

The butler met Harold on his return, extending to him a gracious patronising welcome, as if he were doing the honours of his own house.

“Misterarold,” he cried, making one word of the name and title, “this is a pleasant surprise. You was not expected, sir; not in the least.”

“My mother is at home?”

“No, sir; out. In the kerridge. She drove Homersham way.”

“See after my things. Here are my keys.” And Harold passed on to the little morning-room which Mrs. Purling called her own. Having the choice of half-a-dozen chambers, each as big as Exeter Hall, she pre-

ferred to occupy habitually the smallest den in the house. To his surprise he found the room not untenanted. A young lady was at the bookcase, and she turned seemingly in trepidation on hearing the door open.

“Miss Fanshawe,” thought Harold, as he advanced with eyes that were unmistakably critical.

“I must introduce myself,” he said. “I am Harold.”

“The last of the Saxon kings?”

“No; the first of the Purling princes. I know you quite well. Has my mother never mentioned me?”

“I only arrived yesterday,” the young lady replied, rather evading the question.

“My mother must be delighted. She told me she was looking forward eagerly to your promised visit.”

“She really spoke of me?”

“In her letters; again and again.”

“I hardly thought ——”

“That you had taken her by storm? You have; and I was surprised, for she is not easily won.”

Not a civil speech, which this girl only resented by placing a pair of old-fashioned double glasses across her small nose, and looking at him with a gravity that was quite comical.

“But now that I have met you I can readily understand.”

The same look through the glasses; sphinx-like, she seemed impervious both to depreciation and compliment.

“And she has left you alone all the morning? I am afraid you must have been bored.”

“Thank you. I had my work.”

It was an exquisite piece of art needlework. Water-lilies and yellow irises on a purple ground. She confessed it was her own design.

“And books?”

He took up Schlegel's *Philosophy of History* in the original.

“You read German?”

“O yes.”

“And Italian? and French? and Sanscrit—without doubt?”

“Not quite; but I have looked into Max Müller, and know something of Monier Williams.”

And this was one of Lady Gayfeather's girls! Was this a new process, the last dodge in the perpetual warfare between maidens and mankind?

Harold looked at the prodigy.

In appearance she was quite unlike the conventional type of a London young lady of fashion. Her fresh dimpled cheeks wore roses and a pearly bloom that spoke of healthy hours and a tranquil life; her dress was quiet almost to plainness; there was nothing modern in the style of her coiffure; Lobb would not have been proud of her boots. Her fair white hands were innocent of rings; she wore no jewelry; there was no gold or silver about her, except for the gold-rimmed glasses that made so curious a contrast to her young face, with its merry eyes and frame of mutinous curls.

"You will not be angry," said Harold earnestly, "if I tell you that you are not in the least what I expected to find you, Miss Fanshawe ——"

"Miss Fanshawe!" Her gay laugh was infectious. "I'm afraid ——"

But just now the butler came in to say that the carriage was coming up the drive. Harold went out to meet his mother, without noticing that the young lady also got up and hurriedly left the room.

"It's just like you, you stupid boy!" said the heiress. "Why did you give me no notice?"

"I meant to have written from Paris. But it's all for the best. You were quite right. She is perfectly charming."

“Who?”

“Miss Fanshawe. I have made her acquaintance.”

“In town?”

“No, here; in your own morning-room.”

“What!” The ejaculation contained volumes. “Was there ever anything so annoying! But it is all your fault for coming so unexpectedly.”

“What harm? We introduced ourselves, Miss Fanshawe ——”

“Miss Fiddlesticks! That’s Dolly Driver, your father’s cousin!”

“Indeed! Then I wish I had made the acquaintance of my father’s cousins a little earlier in life. Why have I been kept in ignorance of my relatives? Where do they live?”

Mrs. Purling, instead of answering him, took him by the arm abruptly, as if to ask him some searching question; then suddenly checking herself, she said—

“Have you had lunch? It must be ready. Come into the dining-room.”

“Will not Miss Driver join us?”

“She will go to the housekeeper’s room, where she ought to have been sitting, and not in my boudoir.”

“Mother!”

“It’s as well to be plain-spoken. Dolly Driver is not

of our rank in life. Her parents are miserably poor. Nevertheless,"—as if the crime hardly deserved such liberal pardon,—“I am not indisposed to help them. She is going to a situation.”

“Poor girl! Companion or governess? or both?”

“Neither; she will be either housemaid or under-nurse.”

Harold almost jumped off his chair.

“A girl like that! as a domestic servant! Mother, it's a disgraceful shame!”

“The disgrace is in the language you permit yourself to use to me. Your travels have made you rather boisterous and *gauche*. What disgrace can there be in honest work? Household work is honourable, and was once occupation for the daughters of kings. Happily the world grows more sensible. I look to the day as not far distant when the wide-spread employment of lady-helps will solve that terrible problem—the redundancy of girls.”

“My cousin will not continue redundant, I feel sure.”

“She is not your cousin.”

“Whether or no, she should be spared the degradation you propose. She is a girl of culture, highly educated. You cannot condemn her to the kitchen.”

"The lady-helps have their own apartment; but I decline to justify myself."

And Mrs. Purling lapsed into silence. There was friction between them already.

"Where are you going?" she asked, when lunch was over.

"To the housekeeper's room."

"Harold, I forbid you. It's highly improper—it's absolutely indelicate."

"She is my cousin; besides there is a *chaperone*, Mrs. Haigh, or I'll call in the cook."

"Do you mean to set me at defiance?"

"I mean to do what I consider right, even although my views may not coincide with yours, mother."

For the rest of the day, indeed, Harold never left his newly-found cousin's side. The heiress fumed and fretted, and scolded, but all in vain. There was a new kind of masterfulness about her son which for the moment she was powerless to resist.

"Of course she will dine with us," Harold said. And of course she did, although Mrs. Purling looked as if she wished every mouthful would choke her. Of course Harold called her Dolly to her face; was she not his cousin? Quite as naturally he would have given her a cousinly kiss when he said good-night, but

something in her pure eyes and modest face restrained him.

Certainly she was the nicest girl he had ever met in his life.

“Where’s Doll?” he asked next morning at breakfast. “Not down?”

“Miss Driver is half-way to London, I hope,” replied Mrs. Purling, curtly. She was not a bad general, and had taken prompt measures already to recover from her temporary reverse.

“I shall go after her.”

“If you do, you need not trouble to return.”

Nothing more was said, but anger filled the hearts of both mother and son.

CHAPTER IV.

“I EXPECT my dear friend, Miss Fanshawe, in a few days, Harold. I trust you will treat her becomingly.”

“One would think I was a bear just escaped from the Zoo. Why should you fear discourtesy from me to any lady?”

“Because she is a friend of mine. Of late you seemed disposed to run counter to me in every respect.”

“I have no such desire, I assure you,” said Harold, gravely; and there the matter ended.

The preparation for Miss Fanshawe’s reception could not have been more ambitious if she had been a royal princess. With much reluctance Mrs. Purling eschewed triumphal arches and a brass band, but she redecorated

the best bedroom, and sent two carriages to the station, although her guest could hardly be expected to travel in both.

"*This* is Miss Fanshawe," said the heiress, with much emphasis—"the Honourable Miss Fanshawe."

"The Honourable Miss Fanshawe is only a very humble personage, not at all deserving high-sounding titles," said the young lady for herself. "My name is Phillipa—to my friends, and as such I count you, dear Mrs. Purling; perhaps some day I may be allowed to say the same of your son."

She spoke rapidly, with the fluent ease natural to a well-bred woman. In the subdued light of the cosy room Harold made out a tall, slight figure, well set off by the tight-fitting ulster; she carried her head proudly, and seemed aristocratic to her finger-tips.

"I should have known you anywhere, Mr. Purling," she went on, without a pause. "You are so like your dear mother. You have the same eyes."

It was a wonder she did not use the adjective "sweet"; for her tone clearly implied that she admired them.

"I hear you are desperately and astoundingly clever," she continued, like the brook flowing on for ever. "They tell me your pamphlet on vivisection

was quite masterly. How proud you must be, Mrs. Purling, to hear such civil things said of his books !”

“Do you take sugar ?” Harold asked, as he put a cup of tea into a hand exquisitely gloved.

She looked up at him sharply, but failed to detect any satire behind his words.

Harold thought that there was too much sugar and butter about her altogether. Even thus early he felt antipathetic ; yet, when they were seated at dinner, and had an opportunity of observing her at leisure, he could not deny that she was handsome, in a striking, queenly sort of way ; but he thought her complexion was too pale, and, at times, when off her guard, a worn-out, harassed look came over her face, and a tinge of melancholy clouded her dark eyes. But it was not easy to find her off her guard. The unceasing strife of several seasons had taught her to keep all the world at sword-point ; she was armed *cap-à-pie*, and ready always to fight with a clever woman’s keenest weapons—her eyes and tongue. Upon Harold she used both with consummate skill ; it was clear that she wished to please him, addressing herself principally to him, asking his opinion on scientific questions, coached up on purpose, and listening attentively when he replied.

“How wise you have been to keep away from town these years! One gets so sick of the perpetual round.”

“I should have thought it truly delightful,” said Mrs. Purling, who, of course, took the unknown for the magnificent.

“Any honest labour would be preferable.”

“Turn lady-help; that’s my mother’s common advice.”

“Harold, how dare you suggest such a thing to Miss Fanshawe? Do you know she is a peer’s daughter?”

“I thought you said housework would do for the daughters of kings; and you have proposed it to our cousin, Dolly Dri ——”

“Were you at Ryde this year, Phillipa?” asked Mrs. Purling, promptly.

“No—at Cowes. We were yachting. Dreary business, don’t you think, Mr. Purling?”

“I rather like it.”

“Yes, if you have a pleasant party and an object. But mere cruising”—Miss Fanshawe was quick at shifting her ground.

“And you are going to Scotland?”

“Probably; and then for a round of visits. Dear,

dear, how I loathe it all ! I had far rather stay with you."

The heiress smiled gratefully. It was, indeed, the dearest wish of her heart that Phillipa should stay with her for good and all, and she was at no pains to conceal the fact. To Phillipa she spoke with diffidence, doubting whether this great personage could condescend to favour her son. But there was no lack of frankness in the old lady's speech.

"If you and he would only make a match of it !"

Miss Fanshawe squeezed Mrs. Purling's hand affectionately.

"I like him, I confess. More's the pity. I'm sure he detests me."

"As if it were possible !"

"Trust a girl to find out whether she's appreciated. Mr. Purling, for my sins, positively dislikes me ; or else he has seen some one already to whom he has given his heart."

Mrs. Purling shook her head sadly, remembering artful Dolly Driver.

"You do not know all your son's secrets ; no mother does."

"I do know this one, I fear."

And then Mrs. Purling described the absurd mistake in identity.

“You are not angry?” she went on. “For my part, I was furious. But nothing shall come of it, I solemnly declare. Harold will hardly risk my serious displeasure; but he shall know that, sooner than accept this creature as my daughter, I would banish him for ever from my sight.”

“It will not come to that, I trust,” said Phillipa, earnestly, and with every appearance of good faith.

“Not if you will help me, as I know you will.”

Mrs. Purling was resolved now to issue positive orders for Harold to marry Miss Fanshawe—out of hand. But next day Phillipa suddenly announced her intention of returning to town.

“You promised to stay at least a month.” The heiress was in tears.

“I am heartily sorry; but Cæcilia—Lady Gayfeather—is ill and alone. I must go to her at once.”

“You have a feeling heart, Phillipa. This is a sacred duty; I cannot object. But I shall see you again?”

“As soon as I can return, dear Mrs. Purling—if you will have me, that is to say.”

The story of Lady Gayfeather’s illness was a mere

fabrication. What summoned Phillipa to London was this note :

“ I *must* see you. Can you be at Cæcilia’s on Saturday ?—G.”

Phillipa sat alone in Lady Gayfeather’s drawing-room, when Mr. Jillingham was announced.

“ What does this mean ? ” she asked.

“ I’m broke, simply.”

“ You don’t look much like it.”

To say the truth, he did not ; he never did. He had had his ups and downs ; but if he was down he hid away in outer darkness ; if you saw him at all, he was floating like a jaunty cork on the very top of the wave. He was a marvel to every one ; it was a mystery how he lasted so long. Money went away from him as rain runs off the oiled surface of a shiny mackintosh coat. And yet he had always plenty of it ; eclipses he might know, but they were partial ; collapse might threaten, but it was always delayed. He had still the best dinners, the best cigars, the best brougham ; was *bien vu* in the best society : had the best boot-varnish in London, and wore the most curly-brimmed hats, the envy of every hatter but his own. To all outward seeming there was no more fortunate prosperous man about town ; the hard shifts to which he had been put

at times were known only to himself—and to one other man, who had caught him tripping once, and found his account in the fact. The pressure this man excited drove Gilly Jillingham nearly to despair. He was really on the brink of ruin at this moment, although he stood before Phillipa as reckless and defiant as when he had first won her girlish affections, and thrown them carelessly on one side.

“How can I help you?” asked Phillipa, when he had repeated his news.

“I never imagined you could; but you take such an interest in me, I thought you might like to know.”

“And you have dragged me up to London simply to tell me this?”

“Certainly. You always took a delight in coming when I called.”

It was evident that he had a strong hold over her. She trembled violently.

“Are these lies I hear?” he went on, speaking with mocking emphasis. “Can it be possible you mean to marry that cub?”

“Who has been telling you this?”

“Answer my question.”

“What right have you to ask?”

“The best. You know it. Have you not been promised to me since—since——”

“Well, do you wish me to redeem my promise? I am ready to marry you now—to-day, if you please. Ruined as you are, reckless, unprincipled, gambler—I know not what——”

“That’s as well. But I am obliged to you; I will not trespass on your good-nature. I shall have enough to do to keep myself.”

“We might go to a colony.”

“I can fancy you in the bush!”

“Anything would be preferable to the false, hollow life I lead. I want rest. I could pray for it. I long to lay my head peacefully where——”

“Wherever you please. Try Mr. Purling’s shoulder. You have my full permission.”

Phillipa’s eyes flashed fire at this heartless *persistence*.

“There is no such luck.”

“Can he dare to be indifferent? How you must hate him!”

“As I did you.”

“And do still? Thank you. But I wish you joy. When is it to be?”

“I tell you there is absolutely nothing between us. Mr. Purling is, to the best of my belief, engaged already.”

“Not with his mother’s consent, surely? Why, then, has she made so much of you?”

“No; not with her consent; indeed, it is quite against her wish. Mrs. Purling as much as told me that if her son married this cousin he would be disinherited. They do not agree very well together now.”

“It’s all hers—the old woman’s—in her own right?”

“So far as I know.”

Gilly Jillingham lay back in his chair and mused for a while.

“It’s not a bad game if the cards play true.”

His evil genius, had he been present, might have hinted that sometimes the cards played for Mr. Jillingham a little too true.

“Not a bad game. Phillipa, how do you stand with this old beldame?”

“She pretends the most ardent affection for me.”

“There are no other relatives, no one she would take up if this son gave unpardonable offence?”

“Not that I know of. Besides, she calls me her dear daughter already.”

“And would adopt you, doubtless, if the cub were

got out of the way. Yes, it can be done, I believe, and you can do it, Phillipa, if you please. Only persuade the old lady to make you the heiress of the Purlings, and there will be an end to your troubles—and mine.”

Soon after this conversation Miss Fanshawe returned to Purlington. The heiress smothered her with caresses.

“I shall not let you go away again. We have missed you more than I can say.”

“And you also, Mr. Harold? Are you glad to see me again?”

Harold bowed courteously.

“Of course; I have been counting the hours to Miss Fanshawe’s return.”

“Fibs! I can’t believe it.”

By-and-by she came to him.

“Why cannot we be friends, Mr. Purling? It pains me to be hated as you hate me.”

“You are really quite mistaken,” Harold began.

“I am ready to prove my friendship. I know all about Miss Driver—there!”

“Do you know where she is at this present moment?” Harold asked, eagerly.

“You really wish to know? Your mother will tell

me, I daresay. How hard hit you must be ! But there is my hand on it. You shall have all the help that I can give."

Next day she told him.

"Miss Driver is at Harbridge."

"In service?"

"No; at home. They live there. Her father is a Custom-house officer."

That evening Harold informed his mother that important business called him away. She remonstrated. How could he leave the house while Miss Fanshawe was still there ? What was the business ? At least he might tell his mother ; or it might wait. She could not allow him to leave.

Mere waste of words ; Harold was off next morning to Harbridge, and Phillipa reported progress to her co-conspirator.

"It promises well," said Gilly. "I may be able to muzzle that scoundrel after all."

CHAPTER V.

A QUAIN old red-sandstone town; the river-harbour crowded with small craft, but now and again, like a Triton among the minnows, a timber-brig or a trading-barque driven in by stress of weather. When the tide went out—as it did seemingly with no intention of coming back, it went so far—the long level sands were spotted with groups of fisherfolk, who dug with pitchforks for sand-eels; while in among the rocks an army of children gleaned great harvests of a kind of seaweed, which served for food when times were hard.

These rocks were the seaward barrier and break-water of the little port, and did their duty well when, as now, they were tried by the full force of a westerly gale. It is blowing great guns; the hardy sheep that

usually browse upon the upland slopes must starve perforce to-day—they cannot stand upon the steep incline; the cocks and hens of the cottagers take refuge to leeward of their homes; every gust is laden with atoms of sand or stone, which strike like hail or small shot upon the face. See how the waves dash in at the outlying rocks, hurrying onward like bloodhounds in full cry, scuffling, struggling, madly jostling one another in eagerness to be first in the fray; joining issue with tremendous crash, only to be spent, broken, dissipated into thin air. Overhead the sky changes almost with the speed of the blast; sometimes the sun winks from a corner of the leaden clouds and tinges with glorious light the foam-bladders as they burst and scatter around their clouds of spray; in between the headlands the sea is churned into creaming froth, as though the housewives of the sea-gods with unwearying arms were whipping “trifle” for some tremendous bridal-feast.

The houses at Harbridge mostly faced the shore, but all had stone porches, and the doors stood not in front, but at one side. The modest cottage which Mr. Driver called his own was like the rest; but as he enters, for all his care, a keen knife-edged gust of the pushing wind precedes him and announces his return. Next

instant the little lobby is filled: a bevy of daughters, the good house-mother, one or two youngsters dragging at his legs, every one eager to welcome the breadwinner home. They divest him of his wraps, soothing him the while with that tender loving solicitude a man finds only at his own happy hearth.

He unfolds his budget of news: a lugger driven by stress of weather upon the Castle Rock; suspicions of smuggling among the roughs beyond Langness Cove; Dr. Holden's new partner arrived last night.

"I have asked him to come up this evening. A decent sort of chap."

Forthwith they fired a volley of questions. Was he old or young, married or single? had he blue eyes or brown? and how was he called?

To all papa makes shift to reply. The name he had forgotten, also the colour of his hair; but the fellow had eyes and two arms and two legs; he did not squint; had a pleasant address and all the appearance of an unmarried man.

"How could you see that, wise father?" asked Doll.

"He looked so sheepish when I mentioned my daughters. Doubtless he had heard of you, Miss Doll, and of your dangerous wiles."

She pinched his ear. They were excellent friends, were father and eldest daughter. Mr. Driver, a scholar and a man of letters, who had been thankful to exchange an uncertain footing upon the lower rungs of the ladder of literature for a small post under Government, had for years devoted his talents to the education of the children. In Dolly, as his most apt pupil, he took a peculiar pride.

“Come in, doctor!” cried Mr. Driver that night. “We are all dying, but only to make your acquaintance.”

The new visitor was checked at the very threshold by Dolly’s cry—

“Mr. Purling!”

And Harold stood confessed to his cousins without a chance of further disguise.

“Cousin Harold, you mean,” he said, as he offered Dolly his hand.

She tried hard to hide her blushes; and then and there Mrs. Driver, after the manner of mothers, built up a great castle in the air, which her husband shook instantly to its foundations by asking unceremoniously and not without a shade of angry suspicion in his tone—

“Why did you not claim relationship this morning?”

He disliked the notion of a man stealing into his house under false colours.

“I waited for you to speak. You heard my name.”

“I did not catch it clearly. Besides, I had never heard of you. None of us have. Your mother did not choose to recognise the relationship.”

“She called you a tide-waiter,” said his wife indignantly.

“At least I’m not a white-tied waiter,” cried Mr. Driver, with a laugh, in which all joined. Then in low voice Dolly said—

“I met Mr. Purling at Purlington.”

At which her father turned upon her with newly-raised suspicion. Why had she not mentioned the fact before? But something in Mrs. Driver’s face deterred him. A woman in these matters sees how the land lies, while the cleverest man is still unable to distinguish it from the clouds upon the horizon-line.

“We are pleased to know you, Harold,” said Mrs. Driver, a gentle, soft-voiced motherly person.

“You have really come to practise here?” went on the father, still rather on his guard.

“I wanted sea-air. The change will do me good,” replied Harold, rather evasively. “I like the place, too.”

Not a doubt of it. Harbridge was after his own heart, and so were some people who lived in it. He found it so much to his taste that he declared within a week or two that he thought of remaining there altogether. He would go into partnership with the local doctor ; perhaps he had another partnership also in his eye.

“ Can’t you see what’s going on under your nose, father ? ” asked Mrs. Driver.

“ What do I care ? I shall not interfere.”

“ Mrs. Purling will never give her consent. Poor Doll ! ”

“ *That* for Mrs. Purling and her consent ! ” said Mr. Driver, snapping his fingers. “ Doll is ever so much too good for them—well, not for him ; he is an honest, straightforward fellow : but as for that selfish, silly, purse-proud old woman, she may thank Heaven if she gains a daughter like Doll.”

That this was not Mrs. Purling’s view of the question was plainly evident from a letter which awoke Harold rather rudely from his rosy dreams.

“ So at length I have found you out, Harold. I never dreamt you could be so deceitful and double-faced. To talk of clinical lectures in town, and all the

time at Harbridge, philandering with that forward, intriguing girl ! Only with the greatest difficulty have I succeeded in learning the truth. Phillipa—who, it seems, has known your secret all along, and to whom, I find, you have constantly written—could not continue indifferent to my distress of mind. Although she has shielded you so far with a magnanimity that is truly heroic, she has interposed at length only to save my life.

“ I desire you will come to me at once. Do not disobey me, Harold. I am very seriously displeased, and will only consent to forgive the past when I find you ready to bend your stubborn heart to obey my will.”

Harold started at once for home. He hoped rather against hope that he might talk his mother over ; but her aspect was not encouraging when he met her face to face.

No tragedy-queen could have assumed more scorn. Mrs. Purling, having thrown herself into several attitudes, fell at length into a chair.

“ I never thought it,” she said ; “ not from my own and only child. The serpent’s tooth hath not such fangs, such power to sting, as the base ingratitude of one undutiful boy. But this fills the cup. I have done

with you—for ever, unless you give me your sacred word of honour now, at this minute, never to speak to Dolly Driver again.”

“Such a promise would be quite impossible under any circumstances, but I distinctly refuse to give it—upon compulsion.”

“Then you have fair warning. Not one penny of my money shall you ever possess. I will never see you again.”

“I sincerely trust the last is only an empty threat, my dearest mother.”

She made a gesture as though she were not to be beguiled by soft words.

“As for the money, it matters little. Thank God, I have my profession.”

“At which you will starve.”

“By which I shall earn my bread as my father did. Besides, I can fall back upon the reputation of the Family Pills.”

“I see you wish to goad me beyond endurance, Harold. Go!”

“For good and all?”

“Yes; except on the one alternative. Will you give up this idiotic passion? You refuse. It is on

your own head, then. Go—go till I send for you, which will be never ! ”

Harold went without another word—to Harbridge, overcame Dolly's scruples, secured the practice, and within a month was married and settled.

Mrs. Purling, in Phillipa's presence, made a great parade of burning her will.

“He has brought it all on himself, unnatural boy ! But you, darling Phillipa, will never treat me thus. *Noblesse oblige*. The bright blue blood that fills your veins would curdle at a *mésalliance*, I know.”

Mrs. Purling was quite calm and self-possessed, while Miss Fanshawe, strange to say, seemed agitated enough for both. Her hands trembled, she looked away ; only with positive repugnance she submitted to her new mother's affectionate embrace. A woman who is capable of the most cold-blooded calculating intrigue may yet have an access of remorse. Phillipa's heart was heavy now at the moment of her triumph. It cost her more than a passing pang to remember that she had robbed Harold Purling of his birthright, and had turned to her own base purpose the foolish cravings of the silly mother's heart.

But she had put aside self-upbraiding when she met her lover in town.

“Faith, you are a trump, Phillipa; but it’s not much too soon. When will you take your reward?”

“Meaning Mr. Jillingham? Is the reward worth taking, I wonder?” For a moment she held him at bay. “Suppose I were to refuse you now at the eleventh hour? It is for you to sue. I am not what I was. Mrs. Purling calls me the heiress of the Purlings, and we may not consider Mr. Gilbert Jillingham a very eligible *parti*.”

“You dare not refuse me, Phillipa,” said Gilly very seriously. “I should expose your schemes, and we should go to the wall together. No, there is no escape for you now; our interests are identical.”

“How am I to introduce you upon the scene?”

“Quite naturally; I shall go and stay at Compton Revel. They will have me, for your sake, if not for my own. I shall begin *de novo*—at the very beginning: be smitten, pay you court, win over the heiress, and propose.”

So it fell out, and they also were married before the end of the year.

CHAPTER VI.

MEAN as had been their conduct towards Mrs. Purling and her son, Phillipa and her husband were not to be classed with common adventurers of the ordinary type. Born in a lower station, Gilly Jillingham might have taken honours as a "prig"; in his own with less luck he might have been an Ishmaelite generally shunned. Phillipa also might have degenerated into a mere soured cackling hanger-on; but they were not pariahs by caste, but Brahmins, and entitled to all due honour so long as they floated on top of the wave. Perhaps if near drowning no finger would have been outstretched to save; but there were plenty to pat them on the back as they disported themselves on the sound dry land. Fair-weather friends and needy relatives rallied round

their prosperity, of course; but they were also accepted as successful social facts by the whole of that great world which judges for the most part by appearances, being too idle or too much engrossed by folly to apply more accurate or searching tests. In good society those who cared to talk twice of the matter blamed Harold; he was absent; besides, he had gone to the wall, therefore he must be in the wrong. On the other hand, the Jillinghams deserved the triumph that is never denied success. To Gilly prosperous were forgiven the sins of Gilly in social and moral rags. If scandal like an evil gas had been let loose to crystallise upon Phillipa's good name, the black stains could not adhere long to so charming a person, who made the Purling mansion in Berkeley Square one of the best-frequented and most fashionable in town.

There were many reasons why the Jillinghams should find their account in perpetual junketings. Social excitement was as the breath in Gilly's nostrils; notorious for profuse expenditure even when he was penniless, he was now absolutely reckless with money that was plentiful and moreover not his own. Nor was the constant whirl of gaieties without its charm for Phillipa; it deadened conscience, and consoled in some measure for the neglect and indifference she soon en-

countered at her husband's hands. But the most potent reason was that it fooled Mrs. Purling to the top of her bent. Self-satisfaction beamed upon her ample face as she found herself at length in constant intercourse and on a social equality—as she thought—with the potentates and powers and great ones of the earth. Gilly Jillingham in the days of his apogee had been the spoiled favourite of more than one titled dame; his success must have been great, to measure it by the envy and hatred he evoked among his fellow-men—even when in the cold shade there were duchesses who fought for him still; and now, when once more in full blossom, all his fair friends were ready to pet him as of old. The form in which their kindness pleased him best—because it was most to his advantage—was in making much of Mrs. Purling. Great people have the knack of putting those whom they patronise on the very best terms with themselves; and Mrs. Purling was so convinced of her success as a leader of fashion that she would have asked for a peerage in her own right, taking for arms three pills proper upon a silver field, if she could have been certain that these honours would not descend to her recreant son.

Whether or not, as time passed, she was absolutely happy, she did not pause to inquire. The devotion of

her newly-adopted children was so unstinting, and they kept her so continually busy, that she had not time for self-reproach. It was a disappointment to her that the Jillinghams had no prospect of a family, and her chagrin would have been increased had she known that already a boy and girl had been born to the rightful heirs at Harbridge. But such news was carefully kept from her; she was rigorously cut off from all communication with her son. There was no safety otherwise against mischance; the strange processes of the old creature's mind were inscrutable; she might in one spasm of an awakened conscience undo all. For the Jillinghams were still absolutely dependent upon her; she could turn them out of house and home whenever she pleased. A small settlement was all the real property Phillipa had secured. Although with right royal generosity Mrs. Purling gave her favourites a liberal allowance, and promised them everything when she was gone, yet was she like a crustacean in the tenacity of her grip upon her own. This close-fistedness was exceedingly distasteful to Mr. Jillingham. He had an appetite for gold not easily appeased, and four or five thousand a year was to him but a mouthful to be swallowed at one gulp.

Openly of course he continued on his best behaviour,

but behind the scenes he permitted himself to grumble loudly at the old lady's meanness and miserly ways.

"I cannot understand you, Gilbert. I cannot see what you do with all the money you get," said Phillipa reproachfully one day when they were alone, and Gilly was enlarging upon his favourite theme. "You live at free quarters, you have no expenses and ought to have no debts."

"Have you no debts, pray?"

"None that you are ignorant of."

"Look here, Phillipa; listen to me. I spend what I please, how I please. I shall give no account of it to you, nor to any one else in the world."

"It is not necessary. I had rather not be told. I do not care to know," said Phillipa, womanlike, forgetting that she had begun by wishing to be informed. She had her own suspicions, but forbore to question further, lest she might be brought face to face with the outrages she feared he put upon her.

"She will take to counting the potatoes next. It's most contemptible. A mean old brute——"

"I shall not listen to you, Gilbert. You owe her everything."

"Do I? I wonder what my tailor would say to that or Reuben Isaac Melchisedec? I've more than one

creditor; they are a prolific and, I am sorry to say, a long-lived race."

"I hope Mrs. Purling may live to be a hundred years at least——"

"I don't. I'd rather she was choked by one of those pills you tell me she takes every morning and night."

There was something in his tone which made Phillipa look at him hard. Was it possible that he contemplated any terrible wickedness? The mere apprehension made her blood run cold.

"O Gilly, swear to me that you will not harbour evil thoughts, that you will put aside the devil who is prompting and luring you to some awful crime!"

"Psha, Phillipa, you ought to have gone into the Church. Moderate your transports—here comes one of the footmen."

"A person to see you, sir," said the servant. "He 'aven't got any card, but his business is very particular."

"I can't see him; send him away. If he won't go call the police."

"Says his name, sir, is Shubenacady."

"Take him to the library; I'll come."

Jillingham's face was rather pale, and his lips were set firm when he met his visitor.

“What the mischief do you want?”

“Five thou—ten—what you please. I know of a splendid investment.”

“In soap?”

He was the dirtiest creature that ever was seen. He wore a full suit of black, but the coat and trousers were white with age and dust-stains; an open waistcoat, exposing an embroidered shirt which could not have been washed for months; his hat was napless, and had a limp brim; no gloves, and the grimest of hands. But he was decorated, and wore a ribbon, probably of St. Lucifer.

“In soap, or shavings, or shoddy; what does it matter to you? When can I have the money?”

“Never; not another sixpence.”

“Then I shall publish all I know.”

“No one will believe you.”

“I have proofs.”

“Which are forged. I tell you I’m too strong for you: you will find yourself in the wrong box. I am sick of this; and I mean to put an end to your extortion.”

“You dare me. You know the consequences.”

“The first consequence will be that I shall give you in charge. Be off!”

“ You shall have a week to think better of it.”

Gilly rang the bell.

“ Shall I send for a policeman, or will you go ? ”

He went, muttering imprecations intermixed with threats ; but Gilly Jillingham, quite proud of his courage, seemed for the moment callous to both. He little dreamt how soon the latter would be put into effect.

Within a few days of this interview the greatest event of Mrs. Purling's whole social career was due ; she was to entertain royalty beneath her own roof. This crowning of the edifice of her ambition filled her with solemn awe ; the preparations for the coming ball were stupendous, her own magnificent costume seemed made up of diamonds and bullion and five-pound notes.

Long before the hour of reception she might have been seen pacing to and fro with stately splendour, contemplating the daïs erected for royalty at one end of the room, and thinking with a glow of satisfaction that the representative of the Purlings had at last come to her own. At this supreme moment she was grateful to dear Phillipa and to Gilbert little less dear.

Then guests began to pour in. Where was Phillipa ? Very late ; she might have dressed earlier. A servant

was sent to call her, and Phillipa, hurrying down, met Gilly on the upper floor coming out of Mrs. Purling's bedroom.

“What have you been doing there?” she asked.

“Mrs. Purling wanted a fan,” said Gilly readily.

She might want one fan, but hardly two; and had Phillipa been less flurried she might have noticed that Mrs. Purling had one already in her hand. But then their Royal Highnesses arrived; the heiress made her curtsy for the first time in her life, was graciously received, and the hour of her apotheosis had actually come. Presently the crowd became so dense that every inch of space was covered; people overflowed on to the landings, and sat four or five deep upon the stairs. Dancing was simply impossible; however, hundreds of couples went through the form. Phillipa, as in duty bound, remained in the thick of the *mêlée*, but Gilly had very early disappeared. He preferred the card-room; his waltzing days were over, he said. He was playing; it was not very good taste, but there were some men who preferred a quiet rubber to looking at princes or the antics of boys and girls, and he wished to oblige his friends.

“Can you give me a moment, Le Grice?” said Lord Camberwell, coming into the card-room. “I have had

a most extraordinary letter. It accuses Gilly Jillingham——”

“God bless my soul,” cried old Colonel Le Grice, “a letter of the same sort has been sent to me !”

“Have you had any suspicion that he played unfairly ?”

“Not the slightest ; I know he always holds the most surprising hands, that he plays for very high stakes, that he nearly always wins ——”

“Is he winning now ?”

Of course. Mr. Jillingham’s luck never deserted him. He was trying now perhaps to make at one coup sufficient to silence for a further space his enemy’s tongue ; the bets upon the odd trick alone amounted to a thousand or more. But he was too late. His hour had come.

Suddenly Lord Camberwell spoke in a loud peremptory voice :

“Stop ! Mr. Jillingham is cheating. He does it in the deal. I have watched him now for three rounds.”

“And so have I,” added Colonel Le Grice.”

Gilly sprang to his feet. For a moment he seemed disposed to brazen it out ; then he read his sentence in the face of those who had detected and now judged him. There was no appeal : he was doomed. From

henceforth he was socially and morally dead, and, without a word, he slunk away from the house.

The buzz of the ball-room soon caught up the ugly scandal, and tossed it wildly from lip to lip. "Mr. Jillingham caught cheating at cards!" Every one said, of course, they had suspected it all along; now every one knew it as a fact, except those most nearly concerned. To them it came last. To Phillipa, whose heart it stabbed as with a knife, cut through and through; then to Mrs. Purling, who, a little taken aback by the sudden exodus of her guests, asked innocently what it meant, upon which some one, without knowing who she was, told her the exact truth.

Quite stunned by the terrible shock, dazed, terrified, was the heiress, scarcely capable of comprehending what had occurred. Then with a sad, scared face, motioning Phillipa on one side, who, equally white and grief-stricken, would have helped her, she crept slowly upstairs, feeling that at one blow the whole fabric of her social reputation was tumbled in the dust.

The lights were out, the play was over, the house still and silent, when, with loud shrieks, Mrs. Purling's maid rushed to Phillipa's room.

"Mrs. Purling, ma'am!—my mistress, she is dying! Come to her! She is nearly gone!"

In truth the poor old woman was in the extremest agony ; it was quite terrible to see her. She gasped as if for air ; her whole frame jerked and twitched with the violence of her convulsions ; gradually her body was drawn in a curve, like that of a tensely-strung bow.

The spasms abated, then recommenced ; abated, then raged with increased fury. But through it all she was conscious ; she had even the power of speech, and cried aloud again and again, with a bitter heart-wrung cry, for “Harold ! Harold !” the absent much-wronged son.

“The symptoms are those of tetanus,” said the nearest medical practitioner, who had been called in. He seemed fairly puzzled. “Tetanus or ——” He did not finish the sentence, because the single word that was on his lips formed a serious charge against a person or persons unknown. “But there is nothing to explain lock-jaw ; while the abatement of the symptoms points to ——” Again he paused.

The muscles of the mouth, which had been the last attacked, gradually resumed their normal condition. The patient appeared altogether more easy, the writhings subsided ; presently, as if utterly exhausted, she sank off to sleep.

Harold Purling had come up post-haste from Harbridge; and when the mother opened her eyes they rested upon her son.

A hurried consultation passed in whispers between the two doctors. Phillipa was present; she and the maid had not left Mrs. Purling all night.

“Mother,” said Harold, “you are out of all danger. Tell me—do you recollect taking anything likely to make you ill?”

“Only the pills.” She pointed to the family medicine—a box of which stood always by her bedside. She had some curious notion that it was her duty to show belief in the Primeval Pills, and she made a practice of swallowing two morning and night.

Harold opened the box; examined the pills; finally put one into his mouth and bit it through.

Bitter as gall.

“They have been tampered with,” he said. “These contain strychnia. You have had a narrow escape of being poisoned, dearest mother—poisoned by your own Pills!”

He half smiled at the conceit.

“There has been foul play, I swear. It shall be sifted to the bottom, and the guilty called to serious account.”

But the mystery was never solved. If Phillipa had in her heart misgivings, she kept her suspicions to herself; no one accused her; there seemed explanation for her cowed and trembling manner in Gilly's downfall and disgrace. The man himself never reappeared openly; only now and again he swooped down and robbed Phillipa of all she possessed—the thrift of her allowance from Mrs. Purling.

As for the heiress, surrounded by the real love and warm hearts of her lineal descendants, she was satisfied to eschew all further acquaintance with people of the Blue Blood.

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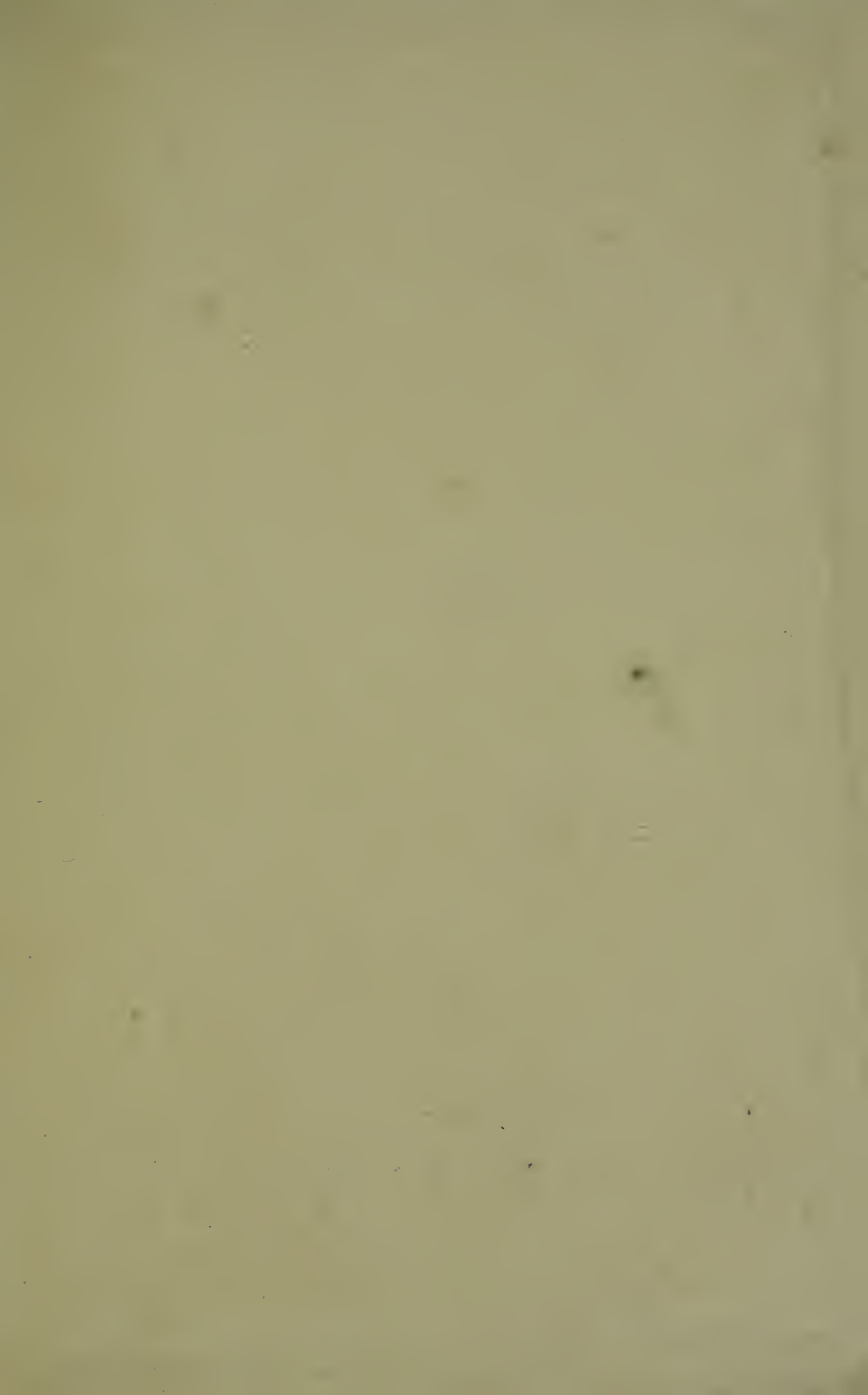
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